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I Have A Confession

For many years I tried to watch eSports and couldn't understand the attraction. At this moment, many of you are nodding in agreement and proclaiming, "That's because it's stupid!" But I ask that you reconsider, because over the last year I have fallen prey to its mesmerizing drama, and eSports aren't going away. In fact, these leagues are just going to get bigger.

This is not the boldest of statements, as most analysts and game publishers agree that eSports have nowhere to go but up. Any developer making a competitive game can't help but dream that its title will have that special formula that finds the following necessary to launch it to that elite status of competitive games.

If you have never watched before, I highly recommend that you start with the Call of Duty competitions. I don't play tons of Call of Duty multiplayer, but you don't need to be an expert to enjoy the spectacle and competition. I know it's like rooting for the Yankees, but I've found myself cheering on OpTic Gaming, a stacked team that features a who's who of pro gamers. Oddly, I also love watching them lose.

I've even started watching League of Legends, Heroes of the Storm, and Dota 2 tournaments despite the fact that I barely play MOBAs. I also enjoy the Hearthstone tournaments, as there is just enough of an element of luck that will feel familiar to anyone who has watched the World Series of Poker and understands that how the cards fall can have an impact on competition. And fighting game competitions, like the recent EVO Championship Series, have more drama than any Floyd Mayweather, Jr. fight.

That's the magic – eSports has all the elements of successful sporting leagues. You can hear that classic ABC's *Wide World of Sports* tagline running through your head, "The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." You may not know the game, but the elements of competition are ancient and universal. There is no denying that all the participants in these events have crazy skill.

So give it a shot. Start small. Watch the finals of an MLG, ESL, or EVO tournament. Follow the personalities. It's as engaging as any mainstream sport, but it's better because it's video games.

Cheers,

PS: As you may have noticed, this issue features a reformat of our classic Game Informer footprint. We put off this change as long as we could, but the world of publishing is much different today than when we introduced our oversized issues almost 15 years ago. You will notice minor changes (and some improvements), but overall it's the same magazine you have known and loved, just a different shape that matches industry standards.



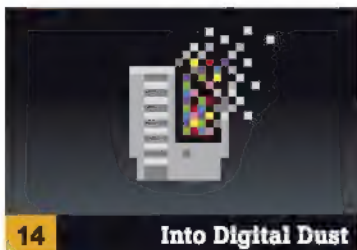
Destiny: The Taken King

Straddling the line between full-on sequel and large expansion, *Destiny: The Taken King* is a huge experience that makes myriad changes to *Destiny*'s core game, and offers more insight into the world and stories with all kinds of new content. We've played the expansion, and have all-new details on what to expect.

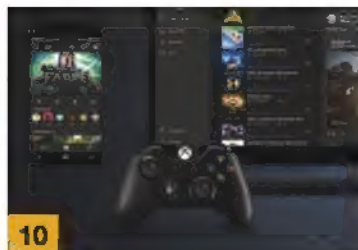
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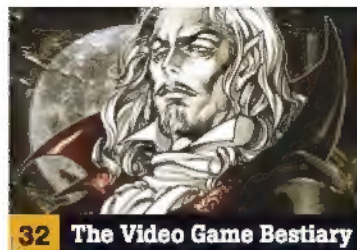
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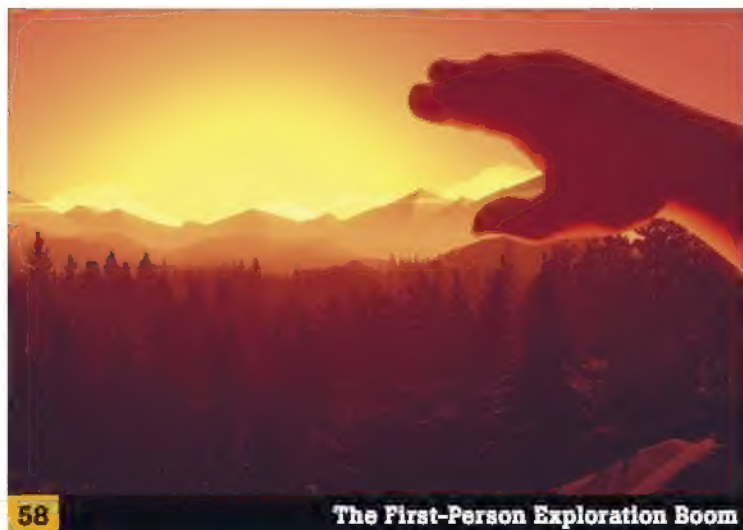
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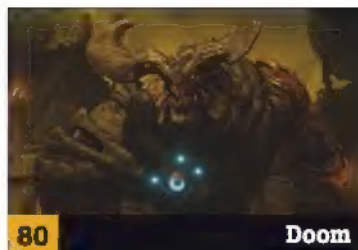
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Readers have questions about the Halo 5 Collector's Edition and its lack of a physical disc. They also discuss timed DLC and our piece on Assassin's Creed creator Patrice Désilets.

» 8 Connect

We recently lost an important part of Nintendo and a big part of the video game industry with the passing of Nintendo's president and CEO Satoru Iwata. We remember his impact on the world of video games.

» 64 Previews

We find out what Madden has in store for fans this year and try to keep up with Faith in Mirror's Edge Catalyst. We also check out what's new for The Banner Saga sequel, and take a first look at Doom's impressive multiplayer.

» 82 Reviews

We look at a pair of PlayStation 4 re-releases this month with God of War III and PlanetSide 2. We also offer our feedback on Rory McIlroy PGA Tour 16, Her Story, and the surprising car-and-soccer combo, Rocket League.

» 96 Game Over

We detail Destiny's Taken King himself, Oryx, speaking with Bungie's artists about the specifics of his design.



F Halo 5, Star Wars Battlefront, and DLC practices are all hot topics this month, as was Sony's surprising new Call of Duty partnership – something Xbox fans aren't too stoked about. Go figure.

Welcome Back, Master Chief

Thanks for your cover story on Halo 5: Guardians (issue 267). I'm a loyal Halo fan and own every game in the series (in fact, I own multiple copies that I still use for LAN parties). I have been skeptical about pre-ordering Halo 5 since Halo 4 was a letdown; the multiplayer classes and added Call of Duty elements made the multiplayer feel like it was meant to be all run-and-gun with no strategy or level familiarization needed. I was super excited to hear that Halo 5's DLC maps will be free and that the MP classes are gone, and I am overall excited again thanks to your article. However, my heart sunk when I heard there is no split-screen co-op. The next time you see the folks at 343, please encourage them to bring it back. It's a staple of the Halo franchise, especially for those that really enjoy the campaign.

John Forsythe
via email

After reading your article on Halo 5, I can only say bravo to 343 Industries for acknowledging their mistakes with the Master Chief Collection, and bravo to Bryan Vore for the well-written article. I just have one question: Is the "final mystery" teased at the end of your story the new Warzone mode? Either way, Halo 5 looks like it will shine come October 27th and I'm excited for the future of this series.

Josh Gill
Pittsburgh, PA

That was indeed the mystery, Josh, and you can find out all about the large-scale multiplayer mode and see 20 minutes of gameplay video at gameinformer.com/halo5. As for split-screen co-op, its exclusion is definitely a bummer. Hopefully 343 makes up for the omission with flawless online support for the four-player story campaign.

Keyword Limited?

I was wondering if you were as surprised as I was to learn that the Halo 5: Guardians Limited Collector's Edition won't contain an actual disc, but instead only includes a download code for the game. If I'm going to spend \$250 for a collector's edition of a game, I would love it if it came with an actual physical copy. I have the

collector's edition reserved, but if this doesn't change by the release date I will probably downgrade so that I get a copy of the game that I can hold in my hand.

Travis Carter
via email

Microsoft opted to go with a digital copy for the collector's edition so that fans could buy and pre-load the game a week before the actual launch, eliminating the need to wait in line for a midnight launch. However, you're not the only one who would rather own an actual disc. The good news? Microsoft says it has heard the complaints and will be implementing a solution to let LCE owners trade their code for a physical copy for free.

Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com





The Black Op Flip-Flop

I would like to thank Activision for saving me \$60. Because they decided that PS4 timed exclusivity for Black Ops III DLC was good for them, it's clear they value those customers more than Xbox One owners such as myself. This is a trend I don't understand. Call of Duty DLC coming to Xbox first never made me more likely to buy it, but timed DLC on PlayStation has now lost them a loyal customer. To withhold content from paying customers just because of the platform they choose to play it on is a bush-league business decision. It is especially risky for Call of Duty to do this year with big shooters such as Star Wars Battlefront, Halo 5, and Rainbow Six Siege all releasing around the same time as Black Ops III. Is this horrible trend here to stay?

Josh Gill
via email

Until now, Xbox 360 owners enjoyed a long run of early access to Call of Duty DLC, but the new generation of consoles has ushered in new deals. Activision's motivation, however, remains the same: The publisher can pick up an extra (and likely considerable) chunk of change from Sony simply for providing DLC to the biggest current-gen player base first. Unless owners on the majority platform also take part in a voluntary boycott over timed DLC (which you clearly weren't doing when the Microsoft deal worked in your favor), this trend probably isn't disappearing anytime soon.



David Versus Goliath

I hated reading about Patrice Désilets' struggles with Ubisoft (Life After Ubisoft, Again, issue 267). It seems like a growing trend; since gaming is the biggest entertainment medium right now, everybody wants a piece of the pie, and rightfully so. But to fire this guy and send him through developer purgatory because he wanted more solo control over his own project just sounds plain ridiculous to me. I wish Panache Digital Games all the luck moving forward, and they now have a day-one buyer for whatever they come up with.

Brad Cahill
via email

Clashes between talented, passionate creators and the large corporate developers they work for happen all too often in the video game industry. Finding a middle ground between creativity and commerce is difficult, especially given the ever-increasing budgets of triple-A games. Here's hoping that Désilets' newfound freedom allows him to make Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey a worthy follow-up to his previous projects.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Are all games becoming M-rated for the sales?"

Nope.

"Do you guys ever just get sick and tired of playing so many mediocre video games?"

Usually sick or tired, but never both at the same time.

"In one of your issues you wrote that Destiny was to be the top three game, I want to know why did you believe it was horrible?"

Say what?

Reader Gibberish:

"Let me first of saying I have sold wil u as the time there barley any games and I owned an Xbox One."

Question Of The Month:

Who is the best giant monster in video games?

gi spy



(Left) No one can resist the siren call of E3, including Plugged In PR's Heather Sorensen and 2K's Darren Gladstone (Right) Also in attendance: Hit Detection's N'Gai Croal, Electric Playground's Scott Jones, and CNET's Dan Ackerman

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

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feedback 5

On Your Mind

- DLC Purchasing Criteria
- Halo 5 Excitement
- E3 Euphoria
- Battlefront Love And Hate
- Why Are There M-Rated Games?!



The DLC Dilemma

In issue 267, we asked readers what their criteria is for buying DLC. Most respondents valued story content over other content, and day-one DLC is still predictably unpopular. Here are some of the responses.

I gladly buy any DLC for a game that I enjoyed as long as it adds meaningful content and does not feel like it was ripped from a finished game to be sold separately later for an extra buck.

Raphael Martines

I buy DLC when it adds to my favorite feature in the game. For example, if my favorite part of a game is roaming an open world, I want DLC that gives me more cars. If I like the weapons in a game, I want DLC that gives me more guns.

Josh

If you want me to buy DLC, it should add new content, like levels, maps, and so on. It also should add new game mechanics, such as abilities and in-game resources. A perfect example of DLC done right is the Enemy Within expansion for XCOM: Enemy Unknown.

Jack Newman

When it comes to buying DLC, I ask myself one question: Is it a map pack for Call of Duty? If yes, BUY IT! If not, forget it.

Will Nelson

Battlefront Friction

I just finished reading about Star Wars Battlefront and I really love it. I'm glad that this game not only brings back scenes from Endor, Hoth, Tatooine, etc, but that it harnesses current-gen technology and that DICE is making it 60 frames per second. It's been years since a new Battlefront, and it's nice that LucasFilm has allowed DICE to use props from the archives to make this game. I'm also glad to see the Snow/Scout Walkers, TIE Fighters, and other vehicles are in the game and are being used in other locations than the movies. May the Force be with DICE!

Scott Hintze
via email

I was really excited when I saw Star Wars Battlefront was announced, because it might finally give me a reason to buy an Xbox One. As I read more about the game, however, I realized this was not what I thought it'd be. I was hoping to see something going back to the good old days of the first Battlefront, providing a nostalgic experience with more maps and perhaps a few more things to do during battles. However, I have interpreted it as basically another Battlefield with a Star Wars skin, which makes me very disappointed. While there are supposed to be many maps, the variety of planets seems rather limited and there was no mention of anything involving the Clone Wars, which I feel is greatly overlooked in video games. Overall, the new Battlefront is simply not what I expected, and not in a good way.

Liam Farrell
Easton, PA

Ever since the first teaser trailer, the reception to DICE's Battlefront reboot has been mixed. The studio's E3 offerings further solidified that, while the game is hardly a reskinned Battlefield, it's also not the same old Battlefront that fans remember. Those who don't have a lot of preconceived notions about what a Battlefront game is "supposed" to be seem more excited about what's been shown so far, so the best advice we can offer is to keep an open mind. We're sure to learn and see plenty more in advance of the game's November release.

(Left) We can only hope that Media Molecule's Siobhan Reddy and Respawn's Abbie Heppe and Kristin Christopher were discussing the possibility of a Sackboy Titan in Titanfall 2

(Right) You're only as good as the company you keep – which is working out pretty well for Andy, seen here with Hellbent Games' Zoe Flower, Respawn's Vince Zampella, and Bethesda's Todd Howard



WINNER

1 Jason Evans

Jason sculpted both of these Master Chief statues, one wielding an energy sword, and another showing what our favorite Spartan looks like in Star Wars' carbonite

2 Lauren May

Beauty in subtlety

3 Erica Warren

Everyone has a weapon or helpful item in hand. That idiot Yoshi only has a Flash sticker on his chest

1



gallery

2



3



• Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize. Please include your name and return address. Entries become the property of Game Informer and cannot be returned. Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest | 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor | Minneapolis, MN 55401 or Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com



(Left) This year at E3 we filmed a one-on-one conversation between EA Sports NHL producer Sean Ramjagsingh and Assassin's Creed creator Patrice Désilets. Watch the enlightening video at gameinformer.com

(Right) Miller and Ben Reeves discussed what's coming up in Destiny's The Taken King expansion with Bungie's Mark Noseworthy and Luke Smith. Unfortunately, they wouldn't reveal what our actual destiny is

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Satoru Iwata

1959-2015

On July 11, Nintendo president and CEO Satoru Iwata passed away at the age of 55 due to a bile duct growth. Iwata missed E3 2014 due to the growth, which was discovered in a routine medical inspection in June of that year, and the surgery to remove it kept Iwata out of the company's annual general shareholders meeting later that month. Iwata did not attend this year's E3, but that was reportedly not related to his health.

Iwata was born on December 6, 1959 in Sapporo, Japan. The first game he created was a numbers-based baseball game made on a programmable calculator while in high school. He later attended Tokyo Institute of Technology University, majoring in computer science. While at the university, Iwata spent his free time designing games along with a group of friends who would go on to form HAL Laboratory. Upon graduation, Iwata joined the company as its fifth employee.

While at HAL, Iwata programmed titles such as Balloon Fight and Earthbound. In 1993, with HAL on the brink of collapse, Iwata took on the position of president. His tenure helped save the company; he shepherded multiple games in the Kirby franchise and strengthened relations between HAL and Nintendo.

Even as HAL president, Iwata revisited his programming roots, analyzing the battle logic in Pokémon Red and Green (as they were originally released as in Japan) in order to use it in the Japanese version of Pokémon Stadium for the N64 in 1998. Years later (after his move to Nintendo), Iwata helped HAL with the GameCube's Super Smash Bros. Melee, reviewing code and fixing bugs to get the game out the door.

In 2000, Iwata joined Nintendo as the head of its corporate planning division, and in 2002 then-president Hiroshi Yamauchi hand-picked Iwata as his successor. Iwata became the fourth president in the company's storied history, and the first person not related to the Yamauchi family by blood or marriage to take the post. At age 43, he became the president of one of the most important video game companies.

When Iwata took over Nintendo, the company had just released the GameCube and Game Boy Advance

the previous year, but these would not be the defining systems of his tenure. Going forward, Iwata and the company would break from what, in hindsight, these two systems came to represent – iterative systems based primarily on increased processing power. This is how things were done (and how they are still done, to a large extent), but Nintendo wasn't winning that fight. While the GBA had no competition in the handheld market, Sony's PS2 dominated the generation by a mile. Sega's Dreamcast saw Nintendo's old rival ushered out of the market, and Microsoft entered with the Xbox.

Shortly after the GameCube was released, Nintendo began development on a successor codenamed "Revolution," which became the Wii. The company under Iwata shifted its console development away from chasing tech specs and refocusing on the user experience. This allowed Nintendo to cut down on development budget, but it also was designed to attract an audience of casual and new gamers.

In an Iwata Asks interview, Iwata described the strategy:

So the only thing we were sure of at first was the fact that we wanted to point the company in a different direction. But we weren't sure how much change the consumers were willing to accept. In any case, we knew there was no future on the path straight ahead of us, and we realized that there would be no meaning to our efforts if we were just slowly plodding towards the end of that path. So we decided to do something about it. We were convinced that if the number of people playing games increased, there would definitely be a future ahead of us.

The DS handheld, meanwhile, introduced a second screen with a touchscreen in an attempt to broaden the user's gameplay experience during a time when Sony got into the handheld market with its PSP – a system more philosophically aimed toward the home console's appeal of better graphics. The public readily accepted the DS's approach to gaming, with the system (with its different iterations that have released through the years) selling over 154 million units worldwide.

"On my business card, I am a corporate president. In my mind, I am a game developer. But in my heart, I am a gamer."

- Satoru Iwata, GDC keynote 2005

Nintendo's strategy was criticized before and after the launch of the Wii. In 2006, but the system's simple motion controls were a runaway hit. It sold more than a 100 million units worldwide, beating the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 while achieving its goal of bringing millions of new gamers into the fold.

Despite the success of Iwata's strategy with the Wii and the continuation of dominance of Nintendo's handhelds in the age of mobile, Iwata's tenure wasn't free of hardship. The Wii U has not come close to replicating the across-the-board success of the Wii, with the system occupying a strange middle ground. It does not have the mass appeal and charm of the Wii, and it's not technologically equivalent to the PS4 or Xbox One. Nintendo's struggle in amassing third-party support has also been a subject of criticism.

Nintendo has faced difficulties, but that is not what Iwata will be remembered for. It will be for his easy smile and down-to-earth style seen by the public in his recurring Iwata Asks developer interviews and Nintendo Direct presentations that often cast Iwata in a humorous light, whether appearing in puppet form or silently contemplating a bunch of bananas.

And, of course, he will be remembered for his absolute love of games. The fact that he was the head of a major company with a programming background makes him a rarity, infusing Nintendo with an important guiding spirit. At the time of this writing, a successor has not been chosen, but whomever it is, it will be hard to fill Iwata's shoes. "...Even if we have different tastes in games," he said at GDC in 2005, "every one of us here today is identical in the most important way: each one of us has the heart of a gamer."

A Gamers' Guide To Windows 10

by Daniel Tack



Windows 10 is the latest operating system from Microsoft.

latest operating system caters to gamers

By the time you get your hands on this issue, you may have upgraded to Windows 10 for free. You may be wondering about the whats, whys, and hows that make Windows 10 a different beast for all your gaming activities.

We asked Mike Ybarra, director of program management for Xbox, to explain the changes in broad strokes.

"It's really about us making Windows 10 the best version of Windows for gaming," he says. "That was our baseline. We knew we needed to hit a home run in that area. The ability to take screenshots, record gameplay sessions, sharing those sessions, making all the things they do now easier and work better, and bring in more advanced features. It's great for both

developers and consumers."

On the surface, things really are that simple – Windows 10 is a unified operating system that provides tools to stream across platforms, incorporates cross-platform play, and keeps track of all your data and stats, which you can access from any Windows 10 device. Here are some of the stand-out features.



The Xbox App

The Xbox app (which features your friends list, achievements, messaging, etc.) is built into Windows 10, so PC players can set up a Microsoft account and have it available should they ever hop to another platform. Anytime you have access to Windows, you'll have access to your info and social features.

Xbox One Streaming

Windows 10 allows you to play your Xbox One games on PCs and tablets via streaming over wireless or wired connections. This may seem like a niche use, but think about it: you could play games while family and friends use the TV for something else without a problem, and streaming online is as easy as ever.

"Lots of people are already running Twitch on console," Ybarra says. "Multiplayer really took off on PC, so being able to record those sessions is important to us."

Record What You Play

Game DVR is built into Windows 10, which is great if you're a YouTube enthusiast. With just a few button presses, you're recording clips or taking screenshots that can be shared easily.

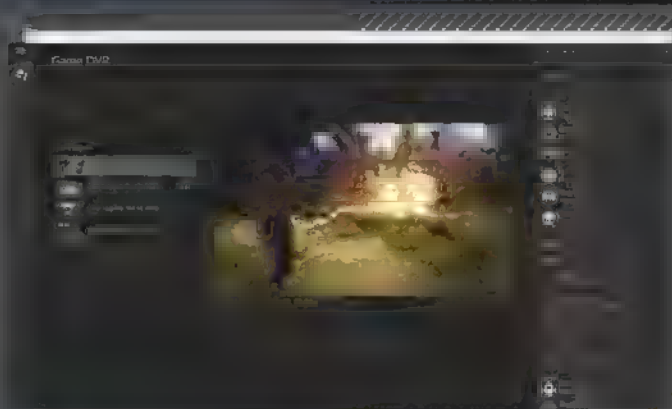
Cross-Platform Play

One of the big features Microsoft is most excited about is its cross-platform play. "The ability to play cross-platform with friends on PC or TV is a big investment we're making," Ybarra says. "You'll have a much bigger pool of players to tap into with cross-platform play, and we'll be investing in eSports as well."

We already know several games that plan to take advantage of these merged Xbox One and PC player pools.

"Our flagship title for cross-platform play is Fable Legends," Ybarra says. "Our studios are making sure that it works seamlessly between input devices. Matchmaking, joining friends, and many other features are all cross-system, so progression will be saved instantly across platforms."

Early titles hoping to take advantage of this feature include Killer Instinct, #IDARB, and Gigantic. Games like Gigantic will give players the option to be matched with the entire pool of players or just those using the same platform, so there won't be any concerns about matching controllers with keyboard-mouse setups.



A New Marketplace

Along with Windows 10, Microsoft is introducing a new marketplace where players can buy games and DLC. These purchases take place at the account level and follow players around from platform to platform, which means anything from a cosmetic sword to full-fledged DLC will be waiting for players when they swap from device to device.

Not all marketplace purchases unlock other versions elsewhere, however, so pay attention from title to title. If you picked up say, Shovel Knight on Steam (while running Windows 10), it's not going to unlock a Windows 10 Xbox Live version for you as well. But, if you picked it up on the Windows Store or Xbox Live, that title would unlock across Windows 10-compatible platforms for you. "The Steam store and the content within the store remain a separate marketplace from the Windows Store on Windows 10," Ybarra says.

Direct X12

What is Direct X anyway? Basically, Direct X determines the hardware capabilities of your computer and then sets matching program parameters - it's an

easy, sort-of-one-way to handle all kinds of tweaking that was a pain back in the DOS days. DirectX 12 streamlines the process even more to put more power into the hands of creators.

"We're giving developers greater access to the hardware, which is going to lead to higher framerate experiences, improved power efficiency, and more," Ybarra says. "Developers are using DirectX 12 across both Windows 10 and Xbox One."

PC gamers are likely already prepared for DX12 benefits. One of the cooler aspects of DX12 is that it's (mostly) backward-compatible with DX11 hardware. Unless your graphics card is outdated, you can enjoy DX12 benefits effortlessly. DX12 is a nice step as PC users prepare for the road to 4k as well, as the GPU overhead reduction is a big boon for screen resolution.

Putting it All Together

Whether you're taking advantage of streaming functionality, new community opportunities to make new friends and allies on Xbox Live, recording and sharing capabilities, cross-platform gaming, or even just Direct X12 - Windows 10 has a lot to offer core PC gamers.



Hitman's Second Shot At The Silver Screen

After the 2007 disappointment, Agent 47 gets a second chance at box-office glory



On August 21, *Hitman: Agent 47* opens in theaters. Agent 47 is not a sequel to the Timothy Olyphant-led critical flop from 2007. Director Aleksander Bach is giving this famed video game character a fresh start with a reboot starring Rupert Friend (*Homeland*). We talked to Bach and Friend about adapting a game franchise to the silver screen. **interview by Andrew Reiner**

How did you get involved with the project? Were you aware of the games before you went into it?

Aleksander Bach: No, I wasn't aware; I was never really a gamer. Folks came to me because of my commercial work before. What was important to them was the character of Agent 47. That's where I got involved. He's such a cold killer, he's an assassin, he's a clone. But at the same time, for me as a director, I was super interested in the mystery behind this assassin.

I played the game, and studied like crazy. I started thinking, "Okay, what can we give to the fans that they cannot get in the video game?" It's hard because every gamer is his or her own director when playing the game. What you cannot achieve in the game, but can in the movie, is looking behind the cold eyes of the attacker, and seeing how much humanity is there. To establish a real antihero, you need to have imperfection in the character so you can feel with him. Those things were very important to me. I have to tell you there are so many game adaptations that are not good. They just copy the game, or they try something that doesn't work. In our case, I knew the key had to be a character-driven story. This is what fans love so much about Agent 47. He's such a great and interesting character. It's a character-driven story, and not just a plot-driven story.

What are you doing to differentiate this film from the 2007 *Hitman* movie?

AB: I personally never liked the first movie. For me, I needed something more like what would 47 do. The first part of that movie is so much about 47 and the love story that I just don't buy it. He's an assassin, and there's little space for emotion in him.

When we were rebooting, it was important to develop a character who is intense and intelligent. I also wanted to reinvent the look for this film. I wanted a visual look, but at the same time, I didn't want it to have a game-ish look. I think it's a fresh approach. It's going to be very different than the first movie. I'm really proud of it.

Did you go back and play any of the old video games for research?

Rupert Friend: Hell yeah, I did. I wasn't a big gamer before, but I got a care package from one of the producers because I told them I need to know everything. I need

to know how this guy moves, I need to understand everything. So my approach to that was to go in through the games. I'd never played somebody who had a whole world created for them before, and here's a guy who has a decade of backstory, history, missions, dilemmas. I wanted to play all of them. I loved *Absolution*. I thought that the feel of it, the gameplay, the intelligence, was wonderful coupled with this incredible attention to detail and graphics. For me, particularly as an actor, what I really got from *Absolution* was that the game makers had studied a regular human being in the way that the guy moved. For me it was very important that the stealth element was a part of it. There is some explosive action in this film, but for me I really wanted to insist with everybody that we keep in the elements of stealing people's clothes, hiding your bodies, the element of "Don't pull a gun unless you have to because it's gonna cause a ruckus and people are going to come looking for you."

The trailers make the movie look like a summer blockbuster with explosions, fast cars, and more explosions. What tone can we expect when it hits theaters?
AB: The stealth of Agent 47 is super important. What you see in the trailer is just loud. I can say the stealth is there in the movie. I took care of it. There are the loud beats too, of course.

Give us a little rundown of what we can expect from this movie from a narrative perspective.
AB: Agent 47 is of course our main character, but it's basically about this girl who is looking for a person. She doesn't even know who this person is. Agent 47 appears and is about to kill this girl. At this point, Zachary Quinto tells her that he's there to protect her. She starts to

trust him because he tells her that Agent 47 wants to kill her. They start to escape. And at some point, we're doing something unexpected. There's a relationship between Agent 47 and Katia van Dees. What kind of relationship do they have? We explore that in the movie.

Agent 47 is an interesting character. He's expressive with his attire, almost like a superhero. He always wears the red tie with his immaculate suit and wields the signature pistols. His personality contradicts this look, however. He's an introvert of sorts. How are you approaching Agent 47's personality on the silver screen?

RF: It's interesting that you point out the attire because we approached the suit very much as a character. If you've read up on the world Agent 47 is from, you know his background and everything, his suit is really important to him, and for me it was a huge help to get that right. We went to see every famous tailor you've heard of to get this suit made. We rejected all of them and we went with a tailor out of Madrid who flew over to our film set to make it from scratch out of the finest wool. I felt like "Here's a guy who kills for money, but doesn't have any family or friends or social life to speak of, so what does he spend his money on?" We definitely think he's one of those guys who breaks out a new shirt every morning. He doesn't wash them.

Are we going to get to know more about Agent 47's backstory or is he going to be more like James Bond in that it's told as we go?
AB: I consider this movie as the first *Hitman* movie. It's a reboot, and a completely different story. We start Agent 47's life. You're going to get a little bit of background, for sure, where everything started, where he came from, what kind of



routes there have been. But it's all connected with the second main character Katia van Dees (Hannah Ware). They put so much into their roles. We're not just creating an act on film. The whole ensemble, especially the main characters like Rupert Friend, Zachary Quinto, and Hannah Ware – they put so much into the roles that I think it's going to be really special.

What about his personality?

RF: We have this guy who is ostensibly genetically engineered. He's been engineered to be superior to the rest of us mentally, physically, stamina, skill – everything. And yet, he goes a bit rogue, and in the eyes of his creator, there's something wrong with his genetic code. My whole take on the character was that's his secret weapon. The reason that 47 is better than the other 46 is because he has that little bit of humanity we all have. He has a conscience, he has a soul, he has empathy – it's just that he's able to suppress them in the name of his job. What happens when [those traits] get activated? An automaton – someone who's a mercenary – is best if they don't ask too many questions, right? Here's a guy we find beginning to ask the questions that a Doctor Frankenstein would not want his monster to ask.

Are there any little touches gamers may notice from your performance that you're pulling from the games?

RF: I worked with the stunt team to invent a style of fighting which felt very 47. We jokingly nicknamed it "garrote," as in karate with a garrote. You know how he's famous for his garrote, but it wasn't in the script, and I thought that was a shame because it is such an iconic thing. So we did a whole sequence with just a garrote, and he escapes from a building, taking people out, disarming people, giving them interesting facial disfigurements, but all of it in a very slick, karate-esque way.

You mentioned working with your stunt team. What kind of training did you do for this role, and how long did you have to train?

RF: It's been a two-year project. All in all, I trained for six months. I trained in boxing, Filipino knife work, Judo, Krav Maga, a little bit of kung-fu, and then a kind of style that the boys invented for 47 where he uses his legs on the top end of bodies. He'll climb up you, wrap a leg around your neck, break it, take you to the floor – that's something I must've done 40 or 50 times. You get quite friendly with your stuntman when you have to climb up his body.

Are you still playing games after getting your *Hitman* fix?

RF: This is maybe a really geeky thing to admit to – I don't know what the cool games are these days – but I am totally hooked on *Hearthstone*. My oldest friend, who I've known since I was eight, introduced me. We used to play on the Commodore 64 together. He had an Atari and I had a Commodore 64. You know, when you had to put in a cassette and wait 10 minutes for it to load? I'm glad we don't have to do that anymore. The only complaint I have about *Hearthstone* is you should be able to gift people your cards. ♦





Into Digital Dust

The fight to save gaming's past before it disappears forever

Buried deep under the city of Culpeper, Virginia rests some of the oldest and most important film masters ever recorded. The Library of Congress' National Audio-Visual Conservation Center was converted out of a cold war bunker built to withstand a nuclear attack. Today, 90 miles of shelving spread across 35 climate-controlled vaults housing more than a century's worth of recorded film history. It is an important record of human achievement and an invaluable resource for future generations. Video game preservation efforts pale in comparison. *by Ben Reeves*

*Images Courtesy of The Strong,
Rochester, New York*

In an age of Internet archiving and HD re-releases, one might think few nuggets of video game history are left undiscovered. The truth is, some of yesterday's games still slip through the cracks and become lost to time. While the media age has made us better chroniclers, video game preservation still faces several challenges, and we are at risk of losing our gaming history almost as quickly as we can record it.

The Corrosion Of Time

Video games are a product of their time and place. The original Super Mario Bros., for example, is one of the best-known and most-played games of all time. The platformer is as precious to those who grew up humming its enduring tunes as it is inspirational to a legion of game developers who have created pop-culture juggernauts such as World of Warcraft and Grand Theft Auto.

However, what would gamers 100 years from now playing Super Mario Bros. for the first time make of such a game? They might be charmed by its catchy tunes or enchanted by its archaic 8-bit design, but would they understand its legacy? Disconnected from any historical context, our descendants might not understand the impact Super Mario Bros. has had on the industry or our culture on the whole. Nintendo's legendary platformer would seem like a curious relic.

This is one of the challenges facing game preservationists, because most people think preservation simply means ensuring that a game remains



playable for future generations. However, in order to understand a game's importance to the industry – and society as a whole – we must hold onto more than just the code. We need to place games into a larger context in history, document the oral and written history of their development, and even collect their promotional materials.

While the development of games like Super Mario Bros. has already been well documented, not every important game weathers the test of time as durably as Nintendo's classic. Some aspects of our gaming history have already started to fade like 100-year-old film

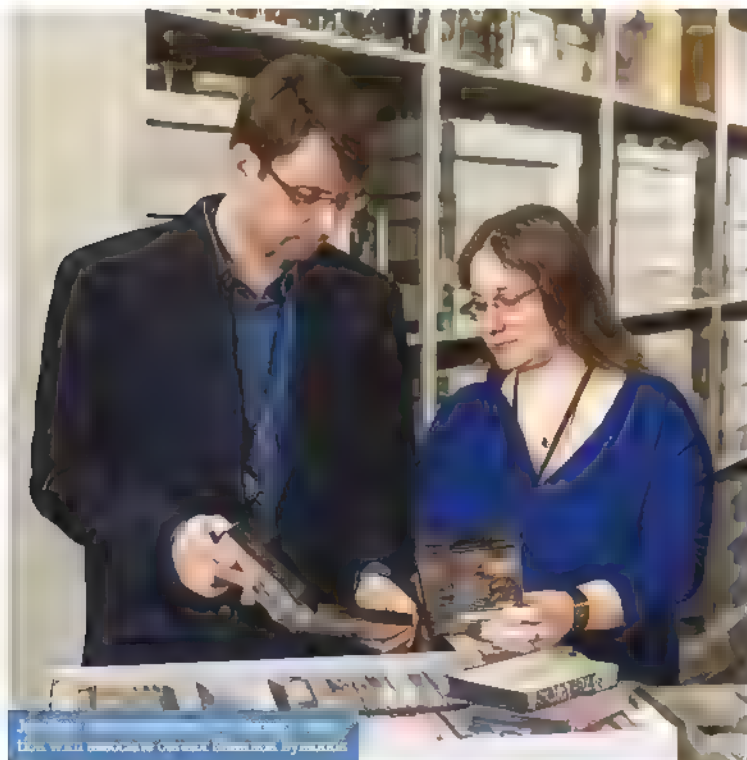
A Strong Start

The International Center for the History of Electronic Games inside The Strong Museum of Play in Rochester, New York has amassed a staggering collection of more than 200 arcade and pinball machines, nearly 15,000 video game fanzines and consumer magazines, as well as tens of thousands of computer and console games. The Strong's goal is to preserve our recreational history so that future generations can better understand why we play and why leisure is important.

Jon-Paul Dyson is the director of The Strong's International Center for the History of Electronic Games. For the past six years, Dyson has worked with legendary developers such as Ken and Roberta Williams, Will Wright, and the late Ralph Baer to bolster the center's collection of rare archival materials, documenting the development of some of the industry's most important hallmarks. Dyson also helps curate several of The Strong's specialty exhibitions throughout the year, which allow the public to access some of these rare pieces of video game history.

"There is no way to understand the history of play without exploring the impact of video games," Dyson says. "Video games are having this transformative effect not only on how we play but on all facets of life – the way we learn, the way we communicate, the way we form relationships. They even help shape our identity. Video games are having this monumental impact not only on play, but on society in general."

The Strong Museum of Play is one of the closest things we have to a national video game repository, but the museum still has a lot of holes to fill. One of the biggest problems institutions like The Strong face is big business' need to meet the bottom line



"The industry by its nature is generally forward-looking, so preservation is not necessarily the highest priority for a company," Dyson says. "There are a lot of business pressures. There's the need to exceed this quarter's expectations, or reach this project forecast, or meet payroll. No one is intentionally throwing things away. That almost never happens. What's much more likely is that people move offices and things get lost."

Even with the recent rise of HD remakes and digital rereleases, the video game industry isn't always focused on saving every aspect of a game's development. Modern publishers are more likely to go out of their way to preserve a game's source code for future use than they were in previous decades, but this doesn't constitute game preservation.

"I think there is an awareness that there is value in old titles," Dyson says. "On the other hand, there's a lot of pressure on new products, and that's realistically where a company will probably make the most money. There's no profit for companies in business records or design documents, so there's less incentive for them to keep those things around. However, those are the very things that document how that product came to be and give us insight into the birth of a game."

Jason Scott, archivist and software curator for The Internet Archive, even goes so far to say that game companies are unintentionally stifling



preservation work by trying to protect them. "Games have such a thin mortality because they're not perceived as something that needs to be saved," he says. "Games are seen as important intellectual properties that need to be protected from pirates, and will eventually fade into history, but if we don't preserve some parts of these games while we have them, they actually just disappear. We're waiting for a hand-off that never happens."

The Internet Archive is the San Francisco-based non-profit famous for building The Wayback Machine archive, whose snapshots of over 427 billion web pages let users browse the last couple decades of Internet history. Unlike The Strong, The Internet Archive is a digital collection of knowledge, entertainment, and software. For the last several years, Jason Scott has been swallowing up petabytes of gaming history, including old DOS games

and other abandonware, such as Atari's E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, which users can play directly from a web browser on The Internet Archive's website. Scott believes efforts such as this are helping change the industry's perspective on game preservation, but this change has been a long time coming.

"If you say to somebody, 'I found a bunch of old books written by train engineers for other train engineers!' Nobody would say, 'Why you trying to save those? You're not a train engineer,'" Scott says. "No one questions the worth of old books or maps or ledgers. Nobody says, 'Why are we even looking at this garbage?' But until four or five years ago, we had that mentality with software. I'm glad we're over that hump now. We're getting to the point where historians like to be, which is bickering over the process of what exactly constitutes saving software."



In order to preserve gaming history, collectors seek out design and marketing documents. Unfortunately, these are the hardest items to collect.

Someday even well-preserved arcade machines will become unplayable. Preservationists hope to preserve their existence for that future.



Saving Software

Most game preservationists believe that video game preservation needs to be a collective effort – that no single institution is capable of preserving our video game heritage itself. Fortunately, the last decade has seen a flurry of preservation work from organizations across the globe.

In addition to the work being done at The Internet Archive and The Strong Museum of Play, other institutions such as The Smithsonian and The Library of Congress have started to amass their own collections of games. Documentaries such as *Indie Game: The Movie*, *The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*, and Double Fine's development series on *Broken Age* have all helped popularized the history and development of games. Last September, The Videogame History Museum announced that it would soon break ground in Frisco, Texas, on a physical museum dedicated solely to the preservation of video game history.

Even national universities have taken an interest in video game preservation. Henry Lowood is the Curator for History of Science & Technology Collections and Film & Media Collections in the Stanford University Libraries. Lowood has been instrumental in developing Stanford's video game collection, as well as spreading the message of game preservation to other universities across the country. Lowood understands the value of organizations like The Internet Archive, but he also believes there are many elements of video game history that can't be uploaded to a server.

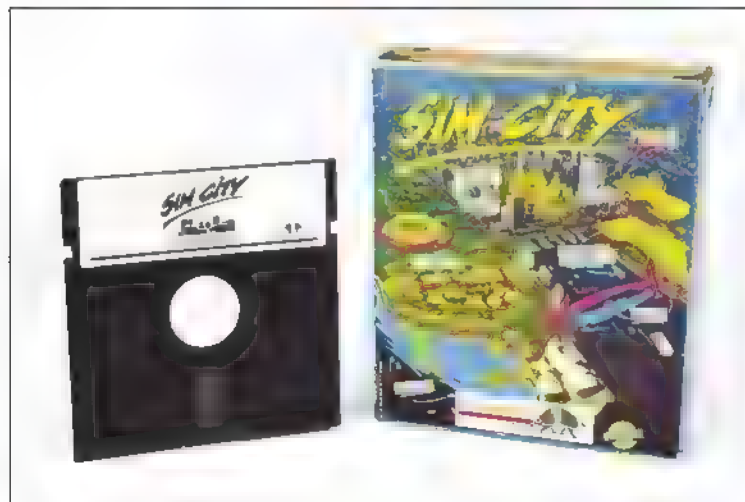
"There are activities around game preservation that don't require running games," Lowood says. "The best example of that are MMOs and virtual worlds. Think about *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft*. If you wanted to learn something about those games in 50 years, probably the least interesting thing you could do is fire up a working copy. The most interesting moments of those games happened

at a particular time and place. That's something you can't preserve."

You don't have to wait 50 years for games to disappear from the landscape. Within the last year, we saw the announcement of a *Silent Hill* reboot followed by its quick cancellation. When Konami announced that it was pulling *Silent Hill's* P.T. demo off the PS4 online store, fans went into an uproar. Instances like these are frustrating for preservationists as well. Unless Konami decides to release P.T.'s source code at a later date, it will be nearly impossible to reproduce the game for preservation on other platforms, and the few remaining PS4s that have already installed the demo could remain this unique title's only legacy.

Physical media such as CDs and Blu-ray discs slowly decay over decades, and computer programs themselves suffer from a phenomenon called bit rot, which means that their performance slowly deteriorates as electronic architecture evolves and changes. Anyone who's tried to get an old DOS-based game working on a modern PC can speak to the frustrations inherent to game preservation. This is why many preservationists feel we should be shrink-wrapping more than just game code while it's still fresh in our memory. After all, gaming history isn't important only to gamers.

Video games have been a significant part of our cultural landscape during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The interactive entertainment industry has touched everything from the way we entertain ourselves and our study of science to the way we train our military. If we don't figure out a way to preserve the documentation relating to these histories we will quietly lose them. In other words, it's not merely game history on the line; it's history period. ♦



The Nickname Game: eSports Athlete or Mobster

Can you separate the pros from the wiseguys?



Former California state senator and noted video game violence detractor Leeland Yee pleaded guilty to racketeering in July. Yee didn't operate alone, collaborating with a criminal named Raymond "Shrimp Boy" Chow.

Organized crime isn't the only place you'll find colorful names — eSports competitions are also filled with aliases that sound like they are ripped straight out of mob headlines. Let's see if you know the difference between someone who will gank you and someone who will shank you. Give yourself extra credit if you know the real name of the mobster or the game the eSports athlete plays. **by Michael Futter**

1. _____ Yeast Baron
2. _____ Lord High Executioner
3. _____ Moose
4. _____ Bodydrop
5. _____ Tony Pro
6. _____ Freeze
7. _____ Silent
8. _____ Peanuts
9. _____ Killing Machine
10. _____ Snorky
11. _____ Ace
12. _____ Rabbit
13. _____ Cheech
14. _____ Sneaky
15. _____ Sharp

1 Mobster Giuseppe Sragusa 2 Mobster Albert Anastasia 3 eSports Tom Handley 4 eSports Adam Krauthaker 5 Mobster Anthony Provenzano 6 eSports Aleš Knežinec 7 eSports Arat Gaziev 8 Mobster John Tronolone 9 Mobster Greg Scarpa 10 Mobster Alphonse Capone 11 eSports Marcus Hoeligaard 12. eSports — Wang Zhang 13. Mobster — Frank Sealise 14. eSports — Zachary Scuderi 15. eSports — Brandon Rodgers



NEW SERIES FROM KURT SUTTER THE CREATOR OF SONS OF ANARCHY

THE BASTARD EXECUTIONER

SEPT 15
TUES 10

FX

Three Early Access Steam Debuts You Should Try

I'm always torn about the concept of early access games. I love offering feedback to a game creator and getting an advanced glimpse at where a project is headed, but it's sometimes disappointing to dig into a game that has yet to find its playability sweet spot. Some early access titles offer a more compelling package than others. This month, I came across three from fledgling development houses that show impressive promise.

As an unabashed sci-fi junkie, *Into the Stars* captured my imagination within minutes. Feeling like a cross-breed between *FTL*, *Oregon Trail*, *Star Trek Bridge Commander*, and *Battlestar Galactica*, the space-exploration game has you commanding the Ark-13, a massive interstellar colony ship navigating through space on the search for a new home for humanity. My playthrough begins with the creation of my captain, from name and portrait to

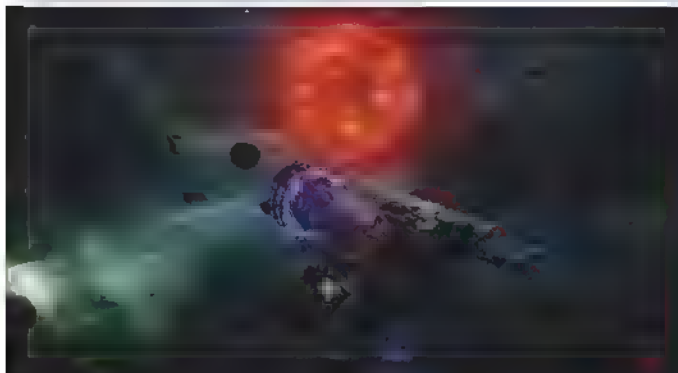
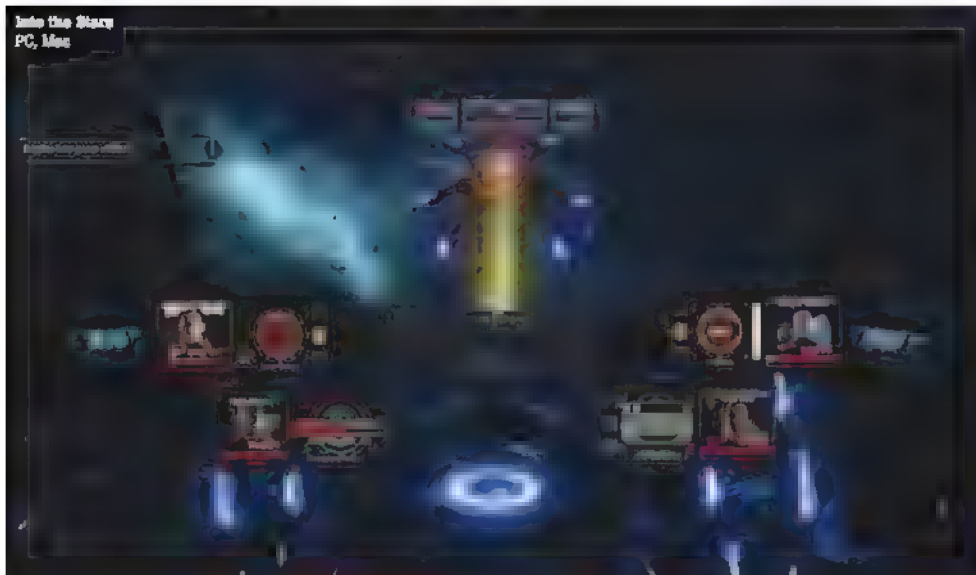
background specialty. I choose survivalist – a commander hardened by years of space travel. Next comes selection of modules for my ship, which forces me to make tough calls. Excellent energy-shield tech might mean I don't have the resources to load up the best torpedoes. Different modules use up different resources, so I also choose what fuels and elements are going to fill my cargo holds. I even get to select my own command crew with their own


stats in engineering, piloting, medicine, and more.

Exploration occurs from either an external ship camera or from the captain's chair, and endless dilemmas pop up as my journey unfolds. A mysterious virus begins infecting the civilians on board, so I assign my best medical officer, taking her out of circulation for other crises or missions. A planet survey leads to a mining opportunity, but by sending down a shuttle mission, I also help some refugees escape to a safer surface location. Later on, an abandoned Ark ship much like my own is found abandoned, and my away team learns of the tragedy that overtook the derelict vessel.

Combat is an intriguing real-time exchange of volleys, with weapons and shields on recharge timers. I can target specific systems on enemy ships, like shields or weapons, but I have to be careful to have my shields ready to deploy just before the enemy weapons devastate a few more precious surviving humans. Choosing the right officers to put on each bridge station can mean the difference between life and death. I'm proud of my novice captain's skills in my first few encounters against the villainous Skorn, but when they send two ships at me at once, my hull cracks, and I get the calamitous message: Mission failed – our species is extinct.

Into the Stars features a vast open galaxy to explore, beautiful visuals, and a clever mix of real-time strategy, procedural roguelike qualities, and resource management. Throw in a score by Mass Effect composer Jack Wall, and Fugitive Games has a lot of things going for its first project.





The Flame in the Flood
Xbox One, PC, Mac

I've been following **The Flame in the Flood** with great interest since its successful Kickstarter late last year, but this month finally afforded me the chance for some extended hands-on. With my trusty canine companion Aesop at my side, my journey down a roaring river is proof that developer The Molasses Flood has something special on its hands. The roguelike adventure starts as my female lead hops onto her raft and begins floating downriver. Navigating the currents is simple but fun, with hard pole pushes draining my energy but moving me away from obstacles.

After an unfortunate whitewater sequence dunks me in the water, my soaked heroine manages to pull toward shore to collect some tinder and boil some suspicious-looking water so it might be safe to drink. After an evening's rest in a rusted bus, the next day brings additional adventures along the procedurally generated river, including an island with a dangerous wolf to scare off, and a handy discovery of some new gloves to keep me warm. After several days trying to outrun the flooding, a devastating current unseats my already tired and hungry rafter, and she sinks beneath the waves.

I love the quiet bluegrass music that accompanies this river adventure, and the thoughtful quotes from the likes of T.S. Eliot and Theodore Roosevelt that pepper the tutorials and item descriptions. Echoing survival games like *Don't Starve*, this game has a more active core adventure to propel it forward, even while the crafting mechanics still seem deep and rewarding. I'm eager to learn what secrets wait further down the river.

Shield Break Studios is behind the raucous **Bierzerkers**, which kept me entertained for several rounds of

team-based multiplayer mayhem. The third-person melee brawler is set in the Viking afterlife, and you choose one of several character classes to battle it out in endless bloody exchanges for glory and beer.

Controls offer straightforward options of medium and heavy attacks, timed blocks to fend off attacks, and a variety of special attacks cued up on recharge timers. Complexity comes with the dramatic changes to play style from each of the different classes. Raiders charge in with sword and shield, resorting to area whirlwind attacks and shield throws. The glass-cannon Scoundrel is merciless at range with bomb tosses and throwing daggers, but goes down easy under heavy assault. The support-oriented Valkyrie flings up walls to block assailants and shields to protect allies. The Drunkard, Huntress, and yet-to-be-detailed Highlander offer similarly

diverse play options. The matches I played were classic domination modes, where the capture of three zones around the board were key to the win. Melee exchanges with other players are frantic, brutal, and decisive.

Bierzerkers is focused on nailing the online multiplayer dynamic, and the matches I played already reveal a player community that recognizes the intricacies of class specialization and strategy. The bloody combat is humorously at odds with the cartoony arcade aesthetic, which is only enhanced by a healthy dose of self-aware voiceover work. There's also something inherently amusing about a game in which your only health packs on the battlefield are foaming mugs of brew. Like all of this month's games, **Bierzerkers** is available now on Steam early access, with a full release targeted for the end of this year. ♦

Looking for more independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, previews, and reviews. For more in this issue, check out our previews of *Banner Saga 2* (p. 70), *Rising Thunder* (p. 71), and *Soma* (p. 72). You can also read our reviews of *Rocket League* (p. 85) and *Her Story* (p. 91).



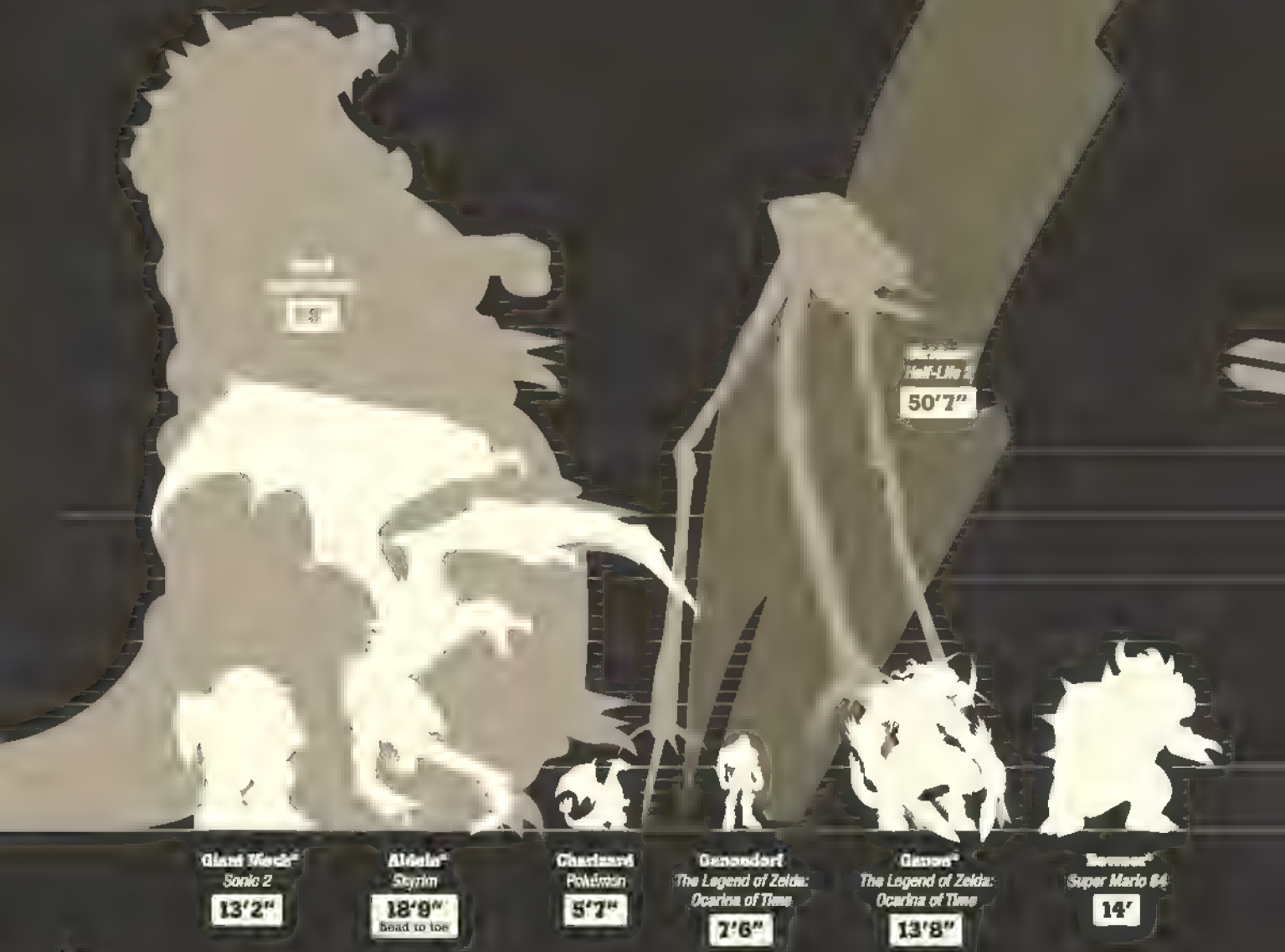
CLASH OF THE

How gaming's most iconic creatures and bosses stack up

Have you ever wondered how giant creatures and machines from completely different games would look if they stood side by side? We took some of the biggest and most well-known bosses and creatures in video game history and calculated how they would stack up shoulder to shoulder.

by David Brown

**Estimates based on our calculations*



TITANS





2015 Nintendo World Championship Winner

**John
"Numbers"
Goldberg**

Occupation:
Marketing Intern
at MechoSystems

Twitter:
@johnnumbers

Location:
Queens, New York

At E3 2015, Nintendo held the first Nintendo World Championship in over a decade, and John Goldberg emerged as the champion. Better known amongst professional Smash Bros. and fighting game tournaments as John Numbers, Goldberg is no stranger to competitive gaming. "I'm actually the biggest threat I've ever been in any Smash game," Goldberg says when we ask him about his history with video games. "I'm consistently placing in money in every tournament."

by Kyle Hilliard

Goldberg mostly focuses on fighting games when it comes to tournament play, but he is also a well-versed puzzle gamer and 2D Mario player, which helped him get into the tournament. The qualification rounds for the competition had players trying to get the best score they could in NES Remix for 3DS in a mode that features Super Mario Bros. 1, 3, and Dr. Mario. The biggest opportunity to grab points in the mode is with the latter of those three games, and Goldberg knew it.

At the time of this interview, he holds the top spot in the mode's online leaderboard. But he didn't perform his best during qualification. "I got 4.7 million, which was a bad run for me," he says. "Four million is above average, but I didn't like it. I usually hit around six million." Still, it was enough earn him a trip to the 16-player tournament.

After making it handily through all the preliminary rounds that featured Blast Ball, Mario Kart 8, Balloon Fight, and Super Smash Bros., among others Goldberg reached the finals. For

this round, Nintendo unveiled a collection of Mario Maker levels made specifically for the tournament. His competition? Cosmo Wright, a famous Zelda speedrunner.

In the final round, the players took turns running through the new levels. Cosmo went first, during which Goldberg was blindfolded with headphones. "They were pumping smooth jazz into the headphones, and that incidentally is my favorite genre second to video game music," he says. "I was just sitting there tapping my hands on my lap like an idiot."

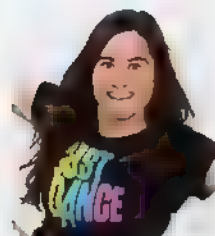
When Goldberg got his chance to play, his Mario expertise made it apparent fairly quickly that he was going to take the top prize. He went back and watched Cosmo's performance after the fact. "I got a chance to talk to him and he didn't choke or anything," Goldberg says. "He just wasn't familiar with the mechanics, that's all."

It took a minute for Goldberg to realize he won after defeating Bowser during the final round. "I actually didn't expect that to be the end of the level,"

Goldberg says. "I thought they were going to throw some bait and switch at me and make me do more levels, especially considering how many tricks there were in the first three levels."

He knew the winner would get a trophy, but the highlight for Goldberg was the surprise appearance of legendary Nintendo designer Shigeru Miyamoto. "I was star-struck when that happened," he says. "I was overjoyed to meet the man. I basically said, 'Thank you for all of the games and experiences you've provided for us over the years. I've had a good time gaming with Nintendo.' And he said, 'Thank you.' He more or less understood what I said."

Despite his verifiable skill going into the tournament, it never occurred to Goldberg he would take home the top prize. "I just thought, 'I'm going to California,'" he says. "This is my first time on a plane. This is my first time on the West Coast. This is my first time doing something with E3. And I get a \$250 Visa card. This is going to be a good time." And it was a good time overall. ♦



Just Dancing Her Way To Fitness

The first time Carrie Swidecki stepped onto the Dance Dance Revolution pad 15 years ago at her local arcade, she knew she didn't do well, but it was a mocking bystander who changed the course of her life. Today, Carrie weighs 75 pounds less thanks to exergaming. She is a second-grade teacher using games like Just Dance to promote a fit lifestyle in the school system; she has even set some Guinness World Records in the interest of raising awareness.

Carrie Swidecki

Occupation:
Teacher

@CarrieSwidecki

California

interview by Brian Shea

How did you get into exergaming?

15 years ago, I was 210 pounds and I was walking past an arcade enjoying a donut and I saw Dance Dance Revolution I had seen it before, but I was too embarrassed to play it. There was nobody watching, so I threw that donut away and decided to go for it. I quickly died after 10 steps and some guy chuckled on the side and went "You suck." And I remember it just hit me that moment. I was living with my mom because I was looking for a job, and she kept all my awards from when I grew up — all my sports and everything — and I walked down that hallway and I looked at all those photos. I went in the bathroom and I went, "I'm done with people laughing at me." I gained 90 pounds within 6 years of graduating from high school. I went from being a 120 pound athlete to being obese. I wanted to show that kid I could play it. In the process of going back every day and playing it, I started getting good at it, and I would say it was a bonus that I started losing weight. That was not my main purpose, but my direction changed.

What made you want to bring exergaming into the school system?

Back in 2009, we were in the middle

of a recession. The school systems were doing cutbacks and getting rid of all of the P.E. specialists and intramural programs — all the extra things — that's when it hit me. I lost all this weight and the kids are all talking about video games, and they have access to them once the school hours end. I wrote four grants to get exergaming equipment. My administration thought it was cool and the kids were excited. That's when I decided to set a world record to educate educators and the gaming community that exergaming could be used to get people fit in the school systems as a physical education program, and that it really does work.

How did the school programs grow?

The after-school program has 100 students, second grade through sixth grade. Ubisoft sent me some updated games and some awards for the children when they completed the program at the end of the year. I grew my program in my classroom from just being me to including all of second grade to the whole physical education program. Then we started the Presidential Fitness program and it was a huge success. From there, I started an intramural lunchtime

program. We hadn't had an intramural program since 2009. Now I have 20 to 40 kids with me every day, and my classroom is packed.

Where do you see these programs going from here?

I see us going school-wide, but my dream is to go district-wide. I'd love to see us go district-wide with intramural programs and incorporating grade-level physical education programs, and with the Presidential Fitness program. We're teaching the children a lifelong skill of being fit that they can have access to once the school hours end. Not only do we teach them, but they become the teachers and they can teach their families and friends.

Can you explain a little about your charity work?

I partner with the Children's Miracle Network. We've raised a lot of money. With Extra Life, we've raised \$34,000 in three events. I also raised \$7,305 for them in a 138 hour marathon. With Dance Marathon, I've been with them for three events, and we've raised around \$26,700. It really does make a difference, and I enjoy giving back any way I can. ♦

massive



Final Fantasy XIV: Heavensward

by David J. Phillips

Square Enix's first expansion for Final Fantasy XIV is a mixed bag. While it supplies a ton of new content, including some great endgame challenges, new jobs, and a smattering of other fun ways to spend time after you hit the updated level 60 cap, the journey there leaves much to be desired.

Almost everything of substance related to Heavensward is gated behind the story from Final Fantasy XIV, meaning new players must complete a copious amount of story content in order to begin exploring level 50-plus zones, unlocking flying, and taking on new trials and dungeons. I don't have a problem with that, as it makes sense that new players should catch up on what's going on first and be the correct level before diving in to new content. What's puzzling to me is the three new jobs are also gated – you won't be able to swap to a machinist, dark knight, or astrologian unless you've gained access to the new Heavensward areas.

The new zones look great and have a nice mix of monsters, with most of them featuring vertical exploration to take advantage of the fact that players can now take to the sky in Heavensward zones. The catch is that you have to tag a multitude of aether currents and complete some quests in

each zone before you unlock the ability. Flight is essential in order to unlock endgame dungeons and complete Heavensward hunts. This wouldn't be so bad by itself, but having to track down these locations combined with the questing options leave much to be desired in the high-level game.

Fates, which are random events players engage in for experience and other rewards, were a popular way to level up new jobs in pre-expansion content. Now, Fates in the new zones are being ignored by the player base because the reward yield is vastly inferior to almost any other activity. The rote quests that make up the leveling fare from 50-60 range from bland to absurdly annoying, sometimes going so far as to just have the player walk from points A to B a multitude of times to talk to the same characters. Maybe you need to find moogles playing hide-and-seek. Whatever the task on the standard

quest front, you're probably not having a good time. Trudging through this busywork is frustrating.

In stark contrast, the dungeon, trial, and story content is the most interesting available in Final Fantasy XIV. Square Enix includes some excellent nods for old-school Final Fantasy fans to explore, from Matoya's Cave filled with curious brooms to an awesome library dungeon clearly inspired by the Library of the Ancients in Final Fantasy V. The endgame content is robust and interesting, and you have plenty to do even with current offerings – two level-cap dungeons, two EX (harder versions) trials, crafting, gathering, a meaty Alexander raid, and hunts for seals to upgrade your gear to prepare for even more content down the line.

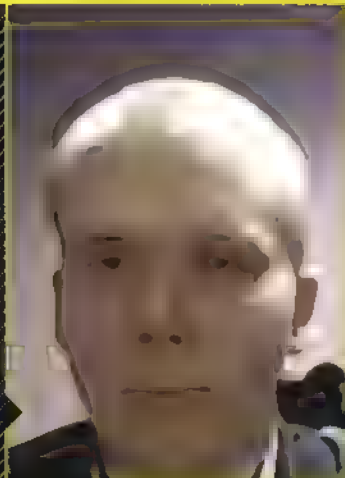
The roulette system offers endgame currency on a daily basis for players willing to dive into random content drawn from the entire game. This is a great way to keep things fresh for level 60 players and ensures that low-level players have people to party with as they come up through story dungeons and trials.

Heavensward offers a ton of content for existing players and has many fun and engaging things to do – once you're at cap. Until then, get ready to run around looking for lost moogles and, if you're new, working through a ton of existing content before taking to the skies on your winking chocobo. ♦

The Good

HACKER Julius Kivimäki has been convicted of over 50,000 counts of cyber-crime by the government of Finland. Kivimäki and hacker group Lizard Squad are believed to have caused the DDoS attacks on PlayStation Network and Xbox Live this past holiday season, which Kivimäki has not yet been charged for. Despite his many crimes, however, Kivimäki's penalty is only a two-year suspended sentence.

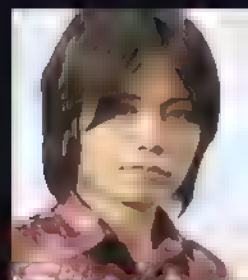
The story doesn't end there. John Smedley, president of Daybreak Games (formerly known as Sony Online Entertainment) says that Kivimäki is still up on 15 more charges, and Smedley has vowed to go after Kivimäki for Lizard Squad's grounding of an American Airlines flight Smedley was on through a bomb threat in 2014, among other types of harassment of Smedley. In one of many tweets on the topic, Smedley said, "I'm coming for you, Julius."



THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

Quotable

"A hard worker and virtuous person, I had always derived balance and good intentions from him when we worked together. I think that he was the best leader Nintendo ever had, all things considered. I wish for his soul, and my condolences to all his friends and family."



← **Masahiro Sakurai**, director of the Super Smash Bros. series, on the death of Satoru Iwata

The Bad



BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT on PC hasn't been running well, with framerate and performance issues, crashes, and other problems. WB Games and developer Rocksteady have pulled the game from online storefronts and plan to re-release the title in the fall. Fixes are also being worked on for those who already bought the PC version. Naturally, the DLC is also on hold for PC players. The good news, however, is that WB says it is reevaluating its internal review process to prevent this from happening in the future.

The Ugly



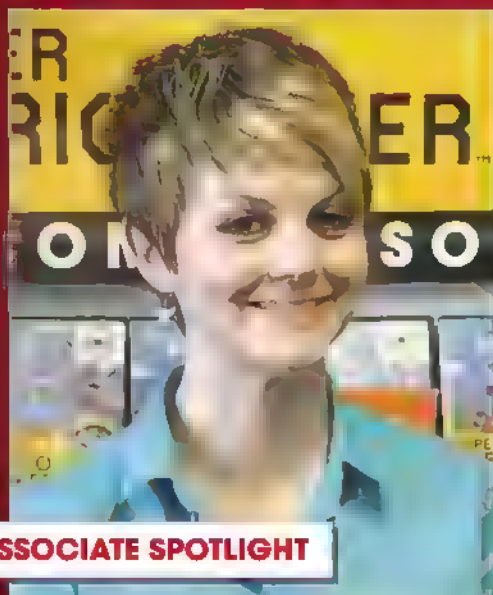
STAR CITIZEN developer Cloud Imperium Games (CIG) and Kickstarter backer and game developer Derek Smart got into a feud after Smart urged an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission of CIG with the charge that the game is expanding into something not originally outlined to backers. In response, CIG has canceled Smart's account with the game and refunded his money with the charge that Smart is a "troubled user" who was using Star Citizen as a way to promote his own title. "Derek is entitled to his opinion, we just don't want Derek as a backer," read a statement from CIG.

CIG's feud with Smart has caused some backers to call for the company to issue unconditional refunds to those who want it. Currently, Star Citizen does not have any betas planned for its different modules or a full release, and the promised FPS module has been delayed. Recently, CIG has also seen the departure of executive producer Alex Mayberry and senior producer Travis Day. ♦

GameStop POWERUP REWARDS™

GET TO KNOW THE PROS

Say hello to the friendly faces of PowerUp Rewards.



ASSOCIATE SPOTLIGHT

Candi / Georgia

What is your all-time favorite game?

Chibi Robo on GameCube. I'm also obsessed with the Sims!

Best moment of your gaming career?

Catching a shark in Animal Crossing New Leaf! I played for 3 weeks before I got one! I was almost ready to set my 3DS on fire.

How long have you been a gamer?

As long as I can remember.

Batman or Superman?

The Dark Knight is my guy! I even got bat signals on my nails for the Arkham Knight game release.

What's the best thing about the PowerUp Rewards program?

I love the points! I've scored some really rare and cool collectibles off the rewards site. Some I've never even seen anywhere else. Plus, if I'm short on cash, I can use points for Reward Certificates to save money instantly in store!

Tafford / Georgia

What is your favorite game of all time?

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

How long have you been a gamer?

Since I was in diapers.

What is the longest time you ever spent playing a video game?

My longest marathon was The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim. I spent over 30 hours just enchanting weapons, smithing, and raising speech.

Do you have any bizarre gaming rituals?

I must eat combos during bosses, matches, and raids.

What's the best thing about the PowerUp Rewards program?

Great discounts, memorabilia, and it makes all your wants and needs affordable.

If you could re-make one game from the past, which would it be?

Final Fantasy XII - PLEASE DO IT, Square Enix!!!



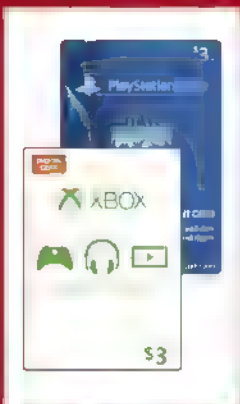







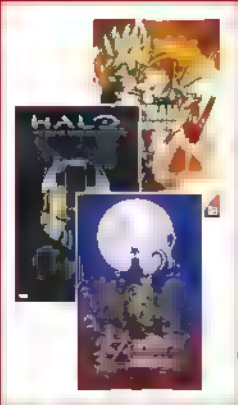

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FROM THE

POWER UP REWARDS CATALOG

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Six Metroid-Like Games To Play While Waiting For Samus' Return

Nintendo may not be making the 2D Metroid game everyone wants, but these studios are filling that gap admirably

One of the biggest disappointments coming out of E3 was the lack of a proper entry in Nintendo's Metroid series. Even Nintendo understands the complaints, with president Reggie Fils-Aime saying, "The reaction has been negative. There's no sugar coating it," regarding the announcement of the Metroid Prime offshoot, Federation Force. But the company's acknowledgement of the backlash doesn't mean we'll be getting the 2D Metroid everyone wants anytime soon.

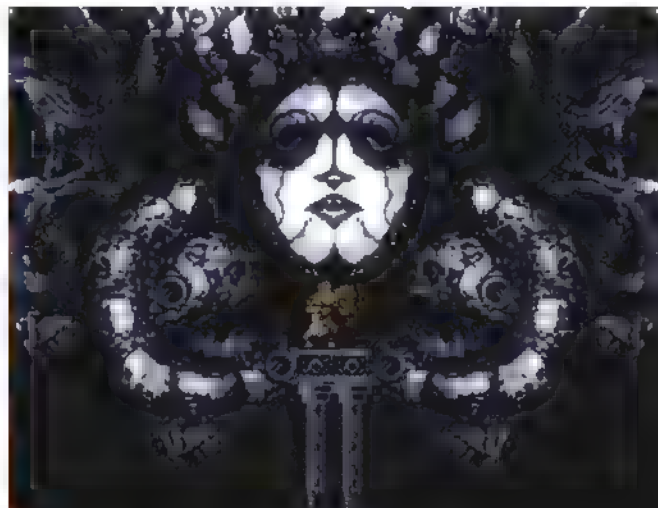
Thankfully, gamers no longer have to rely on Nintendo to scratch that itch. Over the past several years, a number of great releases have emulated Metroid's exploration-based gameplay in a variety of original ways. Here are our favorite Metroid-style games that fans of Nintendo's series should add to their catalog.



Apotheon

Platform: PS4, PC, Mac

Aleltrap's fast and brutal adventure features a clever art style based on ancient Grecian black-figure pottery. The game opens with a young warrior named Nikandros trying to repel an invasion of his home town. After defeating the raid leader, Nikandros joins forces with Zeus' wife Hera to battle the rest of the Olympian gods. Apotheon may sound like God of War, but its twin-stick combat and unique stages built around each god's theme set it apart from other mortal titles. Whether you're sailing along Poseidon's seas, beating back Ares' berserk inhabitants, or turning into a deer while hunting in Artemis' forest, there is something new to experience around every corner.



Axiom Verge

Platform: PS4, PC

This one-man project is everything you love about Metroid wrapped up into a nearly perfect package. Indie developer Tom Happ spent nearly half a decade refining the gameplay of this opus, and his love for Nintendo's classic sci-fi adventure shines through. The game follows the journey of a scientist named Trace who suffers a fatal injury during an experiment only to awake centuries in the future in a world overrun by technology and devoid of human life. Throughout his adventure, players acquire a series of new weapons that help Trace unlock new environments and face towering bosses. We had a lot of fun controlling his remote drone and finding "glitches" in the environment that lead to entirely new areas. Everything about the game – from Axiom Verge's haunting music to its striking 8-bit visuals – screams old-school fun.



Guacamelee!

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, 360, Vita, PC

Featuring an emphasis on action and a Dia de los Muertos vibe, Guacamelee! is a great mix of a lot of different elements. The game features traditional Metroid-style exploration, but a strong combat focus and dimension-switching mechanic mixes up the formula creating something new. As Juan, players battle through a world inspired by traditional Mexican culture and folklore in order to rescue E. Presidente's daughter. Many of the new moves you acquire throughout your journey are also the tools you need to traverse further into Guacamelee's world.



Ori and the Blind Forest

Platform: Xbox One, PC

Moon Studios tells a heartbreaking and engaging tale about a young guardian spirit who must face the wild beasts of a corrupting force to ultimately help bring an ailing forest back to life. Moon Studios' amazing hand-painted visuals help draw players into the gameplay, which is a clever cross between modern Rayman platforming and Metroid's world exploration. Accompanied by a small sprite, Ori eventually learns to clamber up walls, use enemy projectiles to fling himself through the air, and even triple jump. Many of Ori's platforming trials and puzzles offer a sizable challenge, but we found it hard to put the controller down until the closing credits.



SteamWorld Dig

Platform: PS4, Wii U, Vita, 3DS, PC

SteamWorld Dig is a clever little indie game from the studio Image & Form, which has almost as much in common with mining and crafting games like Minecraft as it does with Metroid. Players control a cowboy robot named Rusty who digs out the mines underneath the old Western town of Tumbleton in order to uncover buried secrets. The mines are randomized, making each playthrough different, but equipment such as a rock-destroying drill and water-propelled jump make SteamWorld Dig's tight reward loop all the more compelling.



Strider

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC

Some gamers may remember Capcom's classic platforming ninja from his arcade and NES days, but when Double Helix Games rebooted the series, it dropped the hyperactive assassin into a giant open world. Players are tasked with killing villain Grandmaster Meio, who has taken control of the metropolis of Kazakh City. The game is considered a retelling of the Strider concept, but a series of unique weapon upgrades, fast platforming sequences, and challenging boss fights make this a completely new experience. ♦

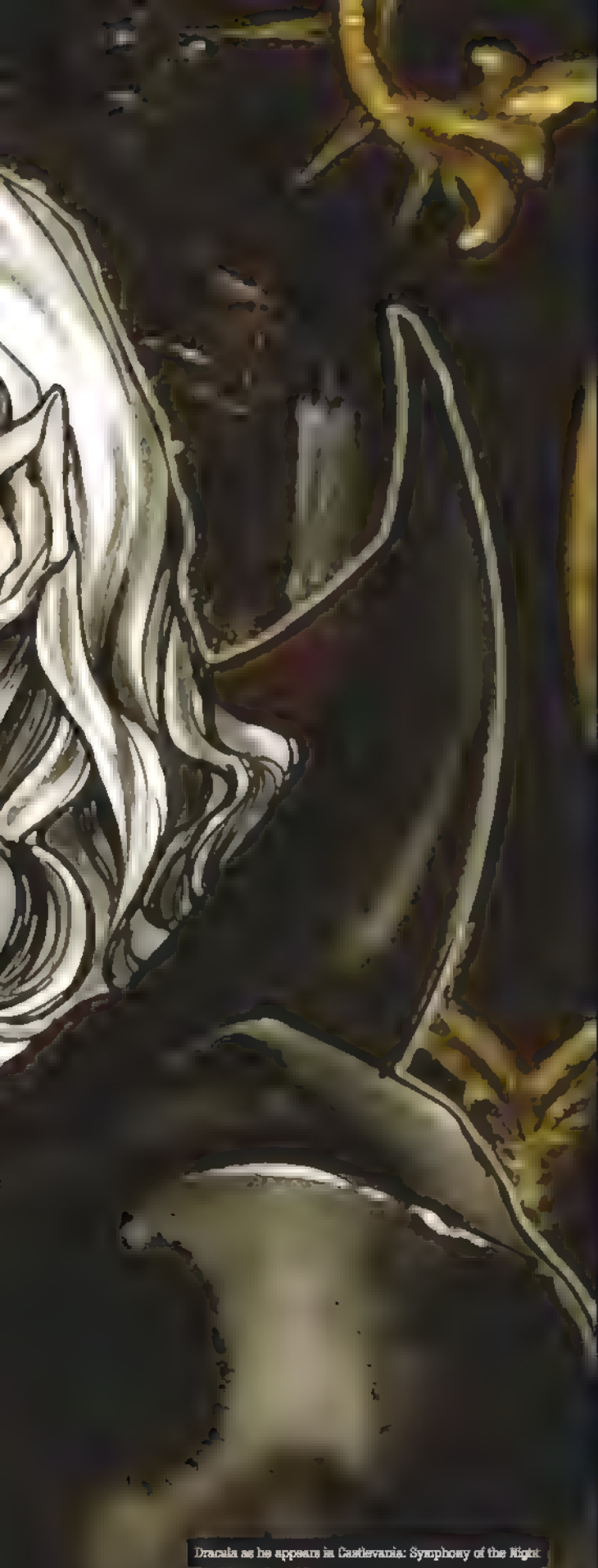
THE VIDEO GAME MONSTER BESTIARY

We investigate the origins of gaming's most pervasive creatures

by Tim Turi

Simon Belmont, the Dovahkiin, and hundreds of other video game heroes make their livelihoods hacking and slashing through legions of monsters — many with fascinating, deep real-world origins we rarely stop to consider. When Frank West is clobbering a zombie's head with a mannequin torso, have you ever paused to consider the undead's roots in Haitian folklore? Have you ever wondered why Alucard transforms into a wolf in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*? This bestiary highlights the earliest beginnings and evolution of gaming's most prolific monsters, along with their role in games past and present.





Dracula as he appears in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*

Vampires

ORIGINS: Blood-drinking monsters have been common folklore fodder for millennia, but the origins of the humanoid vampire may be in early civilization's misunderstanding of bodily decomposition. Unlike the pale, goth vampires of modern times, early bloodsuckers were portrayed as having a well-fed, ruddy appearance, sometimes with blood trickling from their mouth or nose. These looked like the signs of an undead ghoul who had recently fed, when a likelier explanation involves the effect of bloating gases on a corpse. These gases would escape with a foul groaning sound when pierced with say, a wooden stake, which may have sounded like a final gasp. Other vulnerabilities, like aversions to sunlight and holy crosses, stem from vampires' Satanic associations in Christian cultures. Additionally, contracting flesh gave the appearance of menacing canines and claw-like fingernails, further lending to the beastly visage.

EVOLUTION: Vampires didn't become the slick, caped creatures of the night we're familiar with until the early 18th century. Thanks to a cultural climate of mass hysteria spurred on by rampant disease, vampirism morphed into a blood-borne affliction that could be passed from host to victim via bites. This could explain vampires' mythical ability to transform into wolves or bats, creatures that are generally associated with rabies, which is communicable via saliva. Literary works also earned vampires a permanent place in pop culture, especially Bram Stoker's legendary *Dracula*, published in

1897. Stoker's titular antagonist became the definitive mold that all future vampires would be judged against, further cemented by 20th-century films like *Nosferatu* and myriad *Dracula* movies.

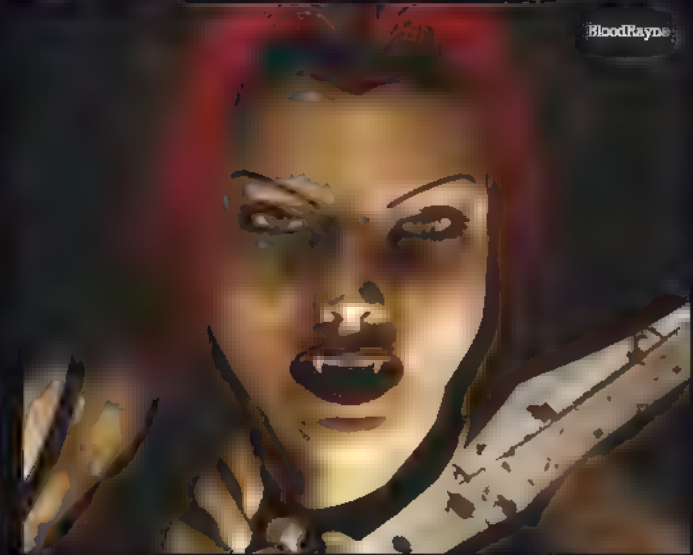
Vampires have received a bloody shot in the arm in modern pop culture thanks to successful paranormal romance franchises like *Twilight* and *True Blood*.

ICONIC GAME: Fast forward 55 years from Bela Lugosi's infamous role as *Dracula* to the release of Konami's *Castlevania* in 1986. Simon Belmont's quest through the haunted castle is overflowing with classic monsters from mythology and classic literature, but *Dracula* is the big boss of them all. Even Death himself is *Dracula*'s lackey.

POPULAR APPEARANCES: *Castlevania*'s unstoppable undead overlord may be the medium's most prominent vampiric figure, but these blood-craving ghouls saturate games. Feral, blood-thirsty beasts with slicing claws roam games like *Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver*, where players can toss these enemies into sunlight to dissolve them into nothing. Some vampires are intelligent protagonists with proficient marksmanship skills as in *BloodRayne* or *Infamous: Festival of Blood* DLC. As long as the horror and fantasy genres remain in style, these creatures likely aren't going anywhere.

AS SEEN IN: *BloodRayne*, *Castlevania*, *Countdown Vampires*, *Darkwatch*, *Infamous: Festival of Blood*, *King's Quest 2*, *Night Trap*, *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*, *Soul Reaver: Legacy of Kain*, *Vampire: The Masquerade*

BloodRayne





A brave hunter from Bloodborne fesses down a vicious werewolf early in the game

Werewolves

ORIGINS: The werewolf legend has existed as long as humans have feared wild, carnivorous creatures. The origins of the classic European werewolf are said to have sprung from man's desire to rationalize random, widespread wolf attacks by projecting their fears onto mysterious, intelligent shape shifters. Similar myths independently cropped up across the world involving the werhyenas of Africa and weretigers of Africa, further suggesting that this folklore comes from somewhere deep with the human psyche. History also connects early pagan warrior cultures, such as Vikings, with wolf symbolism, implying men become wolves on the battlefield. This is one example of shape shifting as an advantage, but the metamorphosis is also commonly perceived as a demonic curse or contagious disease throughout history. One of the earliest recorded stories of a man becoming a wolf is the Greek myth of Lycaon, a king who was turned into a wolf as punishment for serving Zeus human flesh.

Werewolf hysteria cropped up in Europe during the late Middle Ages, where serial killers and

cannibals thought to be vicious lupine monsters were tried and executed similarly to the witch hunts of the time.

Traditional means for overcoming werewolves included forcing the beasts to transform back into humans by pursuing them to the point of exhaustion, wolfsbane, Christian conversion, or fatal methods similar to killing vampires. One of the most important developments in werewolf lore stems from 18th century Germanic folklore about the slaying of the wolf-like Beast of Gévaudan using a blessed silver bullet, popularizing the otherwise resilient monster's vulnerability to the precious metal.

EVOLUTION: Unlike vampires, no key influential literature existed to serve as a touchstone for depictions of werewolves. The tragic, sympathetic werewolves of popular fiction we know today evolved in film, especially thanks to Lon Chaney, Jr.'s wild, hairy makeup effects in Universal Pictures' *The Wolf Men* (1941). Chaney's performances across these popular horror films solidified the sympathetic cursed man's transformation into a wolf creature under a full moon, along with a weakness to silver weapons. While subtle variations of

this classic affliction have appeared over the last century, the core myth has largely remained the same in pop culture depictions.

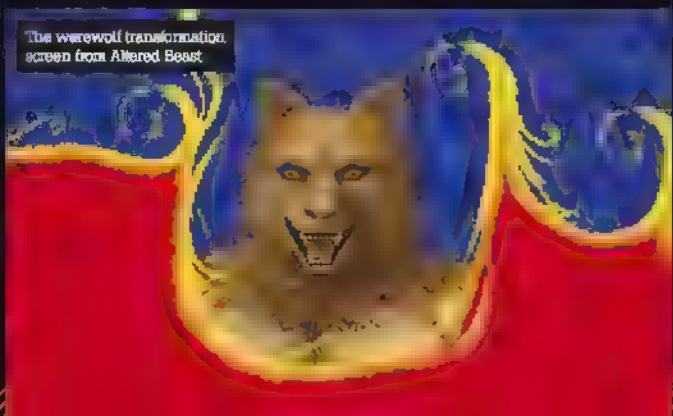
ICONIC GAME: Sega's 1988 arcade beat 'em up, *Altered Beast*, lets players transform into a wild variety of wereweapons. Bulk up with enough Spirit Balls and you can become a werewolf that tosses fireballs, a werewolf whose breath turns enemies to stone, or even a flying electric weredragon.

POPULAR APPEARANCES: *Castlevania* is a virtual showcase of legendary monsters, with werewolves commonly appearing as agile foes, or even as the protagonist of *Castlevania: Legacy of Darkness* on the Nintendo 64. *The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight*

Mystery is a classic adventure game revolving around investigators looking into purported werewolf murders in Germany, celebrated for its intriguing plot and nuanced characters. Video game icons Sonic and Link even had their time in the moonlight, turning into a werewolf and a sacred wolf, respectively. In more recent titles, blood curses turn men into feral wolf beasts in *Bloodborne* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, while *The Order: 1886* features a secret, evil order of intelligent werewolves.

AS SEEN IN: *Altered Beast*, *Bloodborne*, *Castlevania*, *Darkstalkers*, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, *Nightmare Creatures*, *The Order: 1886*, *Sonic Unleashed*, *The Wolf Among Us*

The werewolf transformation screen from *Altered Beast*



Zombies

ORIGINS: The mythology of the shambling, mindless undead we know has roots in Haitian folklore. Sorcerers and necromancers of the Caribbean country were believed to raise and control the bodies of the deceased to do their bidding. These metaphorical beliefs were potentially founded in conjunction with Haiti's ongoing slavery problems, noted as early as Christopher Columbus' arrival in 1492. Haitian lore suggests that zombies' souls belong to their magical master, thus reducing them to walking corpses. In contrast to malevolent masters, the legend of Baron Samedi describes a powerful being that would gather dead slaves from their graves and deliver them to a peaceful afterlife, while the unworthy would be forced to remain a zombified slave forever after death. Some controversial theories even suggest that unwitting victims were drugged and manipulated into believing they had died and been resurrected by ingesting specific poisons.

EVOLUTION: While not immediately thought of by many as a zombie tale, Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* introduced ideas of scientific reanimation to the public, complete with an uncontrollable, resilient, violent undead man.



Left 4 Dead 2



The first zombie encountered in Resident Evil's Spencer Mansion

Famed early 20th century horror writer H.P. Lovecraft built upon this idea with *Herbert West – Reanimator*, an unhinged scientist striving to resurrect humans to similar results. These early works helped separate the zombie from its mystical roots and associate it with irresponsible advances in science.

The origins of the flesh-eating, diseased zombies that infest modern fiction today didn't come about until George A. Romero's classic 1968 horror film, *Night of the Living Dead*. Romero drew inspiration from the apocalyptic vampire world of Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend*, combining the traditional concepts of the zombie with viral, cannibalistic tendencies. Like the contagious zombie virus of Romero's films, the popularity of the undead apocalypse spread across the globe. Zombies largely

remained slow, dim-witted husks until the early 2000s, when films like *28 Days Later* and the *Dawn of the Dead* remake pumped their speed up to Olympic track-star levels while increasing their overall ferocity and intelligence. The popularity of zombies has held strong to today, with everything from AMC's *The Walking Dead* TV series to zombie-themed obstacle races vying for fans' attention.

ICONIC GAME: While early 8- and 16-bit representations of zombies were generally simplistic and unthreatening, that changed in 1998 with the release of *Resident Evil*. These lethal, resilient enemies terrified players of the time and sparked an unrelenting video game trend.

POPULAR APPEARANCES: The undead are commonly found in fantasy and horror games. Zombies are oftentimes the earliest enemies

that players encounter in popular series like *Final Fantasy*, *Ghouls 'n Ghosts*, or *Castlevania*. After *Resident Evil*, the 2008 title *Left 4 Dead* introduced unprecedented waves of fast zombies, allowing friends to fulfill their post-apocalyptic fantasies alongside friends. The undead have become so prolific that typing in "zombies" into Apple's App Store yields over 10,000 results. The trend doesn't appear to be dying down or dulling fans' enthusiasm, either, with 2013's game of the year, *The Last of Us*, earning high acclaim for its mature, nuanced storytelling.

45 SEEN IN: *Call of Duty*, *Castlevania*, *Ghouls 'n Ghosts*, *Dark Souls*, *DayZ*, *Dead Rising*, *Doom*, *Dying Light*, *Resident Evil*, *Dead Island*, *The Last of Us*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Minecraft*, *Plants vs. Zombies*, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Zombies Ate My Neighbors*

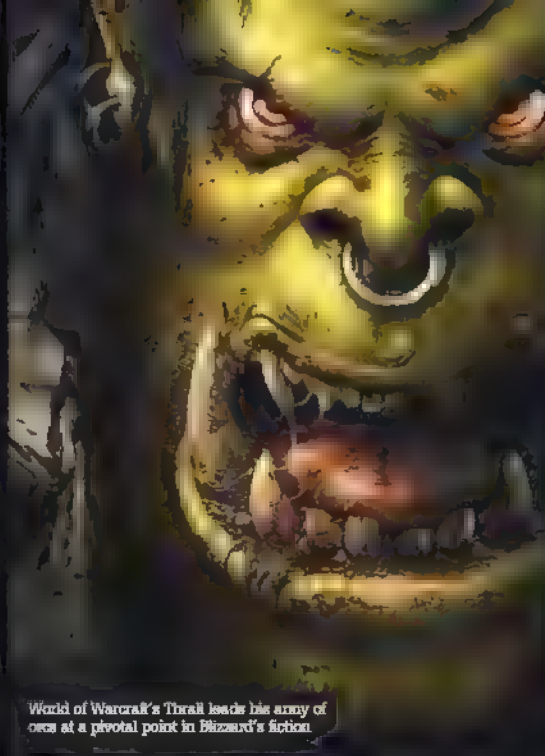


Many games, like *The Last of Us*, avoid directly using the word "zombie," but we all know what's happening here

Orcs

ORIGINS: Unlike the other iconic creatures featured here, the classic barbaric, green-skinned orc is entirely the creation of celebrated *Lord of the Rings* scribe J.R.R. Tolkien. The author was a linguist who enjoyed studying and creating languages such as elvish. Tolkien's keen interest in etymology inspired his naming of orcs, which supposedly comes from the Latin word *Orcus*, the demonic Roman god of the dead. *Orcus'* name came to be associated with demons and monsters called "ogre" in French or "orco" in Italian, which were commonly bestial, tusked, menacing creatures that feasted on human flesh.

EVOLUTION: Lumbering, hairy ogres and massive cyclops are iconic representations of ogres, but Tolkien's orcs are different. Unlike giant ogres, orcs are shorter than humans, though they're still ugly, generally dark-skinned, fanged, and easily manipulated into military action by malevolent overlords like Sauron. Man-sized orcs appear more commonly in Peter Jackson's modern *Lord of the Rings* films and feature a wide range of skin tones, from blotchy greens to pale. Orcs were too irresistible to fantasy nerds to remain solely within Middle-earth, and became mainstays in tabletop roleplaying games of the '70s and '80s like *Dungeons & Dragons* and



World of Warcraft's Thrall leads his army of orcs at a pivotal point in Blizzard's fiction.

Warhammer, doubling down on hulking, ape-like war monsters with green skin. RPGs like *Warhammer 40,000* and *Shadowrun* eschewed the high fantasy setting, introducing orcs to futuristic, sci-fi technology like chainswords and cybernetics, respectively.

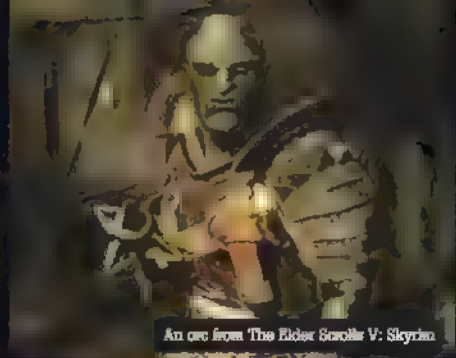
ICONIC GAME: The warring green brutes came into their own with Blizzard's *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*. The real-time strategy series let players control war-mongering orc units, and provided

sympathetic context for the orcs by showing how hellish entities are manipulating the orcs' attacks against Azeroth.

POPULAR APPEARANCES: Orcs have been mainstay enemy fodder in video games for decades, including early *Lord of the Rings* games as well as classic series like *Gauntlet* and *Shadowrun*. *World of Warcraft* and Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* series took things a step further, letting players create and play their own mighty

orc. More recently, Middle-earth: *Shadow of Mordor* pitted players against a special breed of orcs called *uruks*, who featured their own dynamic class structure, complete with violent in-fighting.

AS SEEN IN: *Blackthorne*, *Dungeon Keeper*, *The Elder Scrolls*, *EverQuest*, *Gauntlet*, *Grandia*, *Knack*, *Magicka*, Middle-earth: *Shadow of Mordor*, *Orcs Must Die!*, *Shadowrun*, *Space Marine*, *Warcraft*, *Warhammer 40,000*, *World of Warcraft*



An orc from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.



Shadowrun.



The uruks of Middle-earth: *Shadow of Mordor* are essentially beefed-up orcs.



Slime

ORIGINS: This classic monster has less obvious roots in literature than other entries. However, the natural occurrence of spreading fungi, slime molds, and expanding amoebas present ripe real-world inspiration for creative minds.

EVOLUTION: H.P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* features an enormous, amorphous, protoplasmic monstrosity called Shoggoth that crushes everything in its path. The 1958 sci-horror classic *The Blob* is about an amorphous blob that absorbs people and becomes red with blood as it grows to the size of a building. The characters of *The Blob* discover the titular horror to be sensitive to cold, finally deciding to drop the otherworldly slime into the arctic and helping establish this monster's elemental vulnerability. *Dungeons & Dragons* co-creator Gary Gygax says his oozing monsters, like the infamous, dungeon-sweeping gelatinous cube, were inspired by "...amoebas, insect larvae, and imagination."

Blobs have all but vanished in pop culture, yet these persistent buggers continue to flourish in video games.

ICONIC GAME: Goopy monsters are a standby in many early RPGs of the '80s, likely thanks to developers with penchants for *Dungeons & Dragons*. A recurring, early enemy in the *Dragon Quest* series is the adorable, simple slime. Far from terrifying, this little guy was cute enough to become the series mascot.

POPULAR APPEARANCES: Like *Dragon Quest*'s slimes, flans and puddings appear in *Final Fantasy* games, graced with resistance to physical attack thanks to their mushy form, though they're typically weak to elemental magic. The *Legend of Zelda* series is filled with slime monsters, including shield-eating Like Likes and Wind Waker's collectable ChuChu's. Another broadly used slime monster trope is the slime monster that splits into smaller, individually minded critters when hit.

Globular creatures aren't always enemies, however. The titular sidekick from *A Boy and His Blob* can consume jellybeans to transform into useful tools like a ladder, rocket, or an anvil.

AS SEEN IN: *A Boy and His Blob*, *Castlevania*, *de Blob*, *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy*, *Gish*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *The Ooze*, *Pokémon*, *Rogue Legacy*, *Super Meat Boy*, *Tales from Space: Mutant Blobs Attack*, *World of Warcraft*, *Bloodborne* ♦

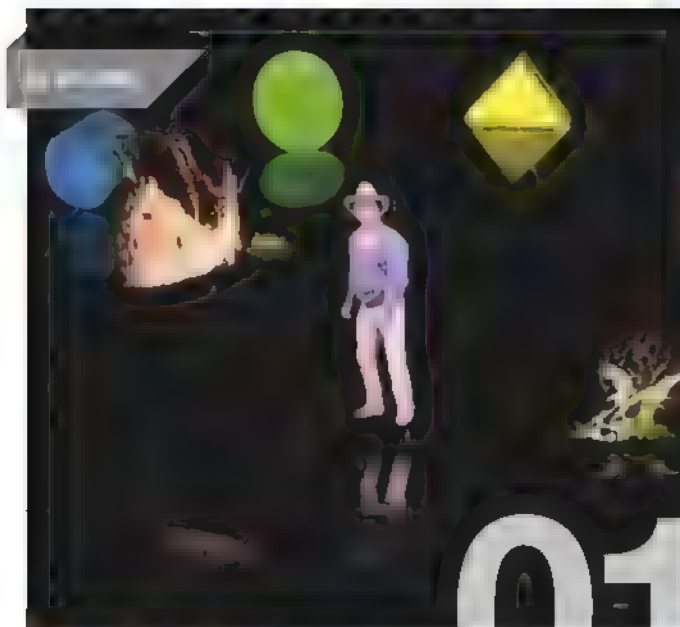


Dragon Quest Heroes



A Boy and His Blob

Time Travelers



Marshal Graham

Time Traveler

So what if only a small fraction of gamers ever played this holographic arcade machine? Logic dictates that a game called "Time Traveler" would be the perfect manifestation of the concept. Therefore, its cowboy hero must be deft and intelligent – and definitely not be prone to numerous bumbling deaths.



Link

The Legend of Zelda series

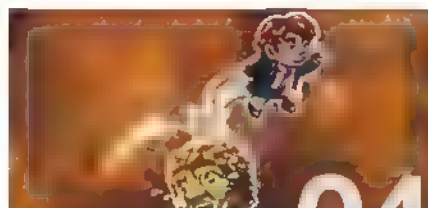
If there were a club for frequent time travelers, Link would be a platinum member. The legendary hero frequently uses music, portals, and other tricks to time-hop. Whether he's traversing days or centuries, his sleep schedule never seems to get thrown off by the time change.



Magus

Chrono Trigger

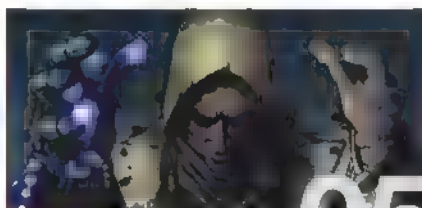
As a child, Magus was transported from an ancient magical utopia to the Middle Ages. Instead of giving up, he raises an army of monsters to exact revenge on the time-devouring beast that marooned him. When life gives them lemons, evil wizards sure know how to make lemonade.



Tim

Braid

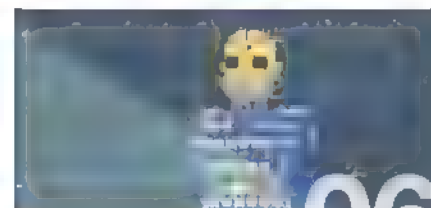
Tim doesn't jump between time periods, but he needs to master all sorts of time-related abilities to solve brain-bending puzzles. He can rewind events, cooperate with a parallel doppelganger, and change the flow of time – but he mainly mopes about a failed relationship.



Kessler

Infamous

We've all thought what we would say to our younger selves if given the chance. Kessler is able to have that conversation, but he doesn't warn himself about a bad relationship or pass along winning lottery numbers; he brings death, destruction, and grim tidings for the future.



Commander Repeatski

Super Time Force

No era is safe from the meddling of Commander Repeatski. The dual-eyepatched maniac dispatches the Super Time Force to save the dinosaurs from extinction, steal the Holy Grail, and more. The goal is noble, but correcting the mistakes of the past is even harder than it looks.



Sissel

Black White: Phantom Detective

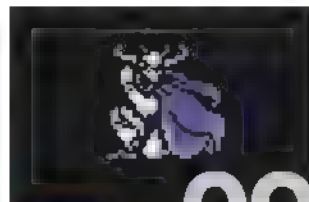
Compared to the other entries on this list, Sissel's time-manipulation power isn't amazing. He only jumps four minutes into the past, but he still saves lives and pieces together the mysteries. Bonus: He would also rank high on a list of Top 10 Ghosts Who Possess Stuff.



Hoagie

Day of the Tentacle

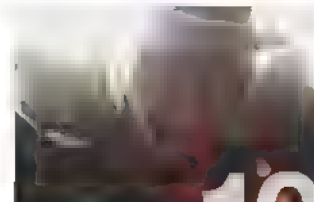
The chance to go back in time to witness history-changing events would overwhelm and amaze most people. Hoagie, however, keeps his cool and remains generally unimpressed as he works with America's founding fathers to prevent an evil tentacle from taking over the world.



Garland

Final Fantasy

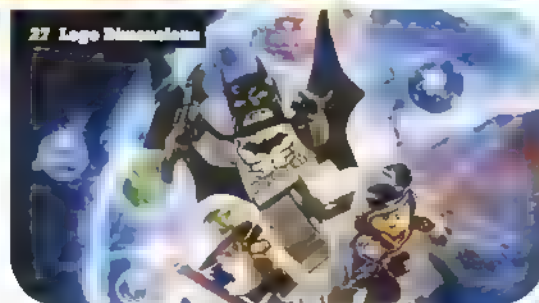
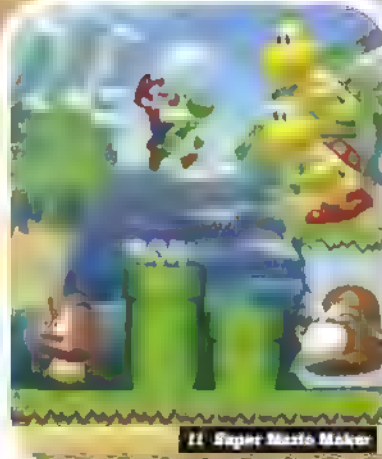
The first boss you fight in an RPG is usually a pushover. Though players trounce Garland early on, a time-travel loop ensures that he survives and eventually becomes the final boss – the god Chaos. Who says entry-level bosses don't have career advancement opportunities?



Abraham Lincoln

The Conduit 2

At the end of this first-person shooter for the Wii, Abraham Lincoln and other historical figures come through a portal wearing space-marine armor. We may never know why this happens, because that knowledge requires that a living person plays (and remembers) *The Conduit 2*. 🍷



01 New Releases

- › Act of Aggression (PC)
- › Danganronpa Another Episode: Ultra Despair Girls (Vita)
- › Mad Max (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360)
- › Nobunaga's Ambition: Sphere of Influence (PS4, PS3, PC)
- › Renowned Explorers: International Society (PC)

02 Captain America White

The famed creative team of Jeff Loeb and Tim Sale are back with a limited series, this time following Captain America and the Howling Commandos' exploits on a special mission set in 1941. The first issue of *Captain America White* ships today.

04 The Transporter Refueled

If you want to see Jason Statham do crazy stunts and amazing feats behind the wheel, watch *Furious 7*. If you want to watch a movie Statham probably turned down, go see *The Transporter Refueled* today. The story of Frank Martin continues without the original star, but looks every bit as ridiculous as the other films in the series.

03 New Releases

- › Hatsune Miku: Project Mirai DX (3DS)
- › Sword Coast Legends (PC)
- › Tearaway Unfolded (PS4)

11 New Releases

- › Super Mario Maker (Wii U)

15 New Releases

- › Forza Motorsport 6 (Xbox One)
- › Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain (PC)
- › Mighty No. 9 (PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, 360, PC)
- › NHL 16 (PS4, Xbox One)
- › Pro Evolution Soccer 2016 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)

17 Tokyo Game Show 2015

Over the last couple of years, Tokyo Game Show hasn't had much to offer in terms of game news or announcements, but the early word on this year's show is to expect plenty of both, especially for JRPGs. We also hope to hear more on *Dark Souls III* over this show's three-day run.

18 Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials

If you enjoyed watching kids run around in a maze, you'll love watching them run around in a desert in today's theatrical release *Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*. It depicts a generic dystopian future in which teenagers are important, so fans should buy multiple tickets if they want to ensure the third (and final) installment gets a film adaptation.

20 New Releases

- › Skylanders: Superchargers (PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS, iOS)

22 New Releases

- › Blood Bowl 2 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › FIFA 16 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- › Soma (PS4, PC)

23 Oculus Connect 2

Over the next three days, game developers and creatives in the entertainment industry will learn more about Oculus Rift and share their experiences working with the hardware. We're also hoping a price point and release date are announced.

25.1 New Releases

- › Animal Crossing: Happy Home Designer (3DS)

25.2 Hotel Transylvania 2

According to three-year-olds, the original *Hotel Transylvania* was a good movie. The sequel opens in theaters today, so if you are too young to know

that the words "starring Adam Sandler and Kevin James" are huge red flags, you should go see it. Enjoy.

25.3 TwitchCon 2015

Twitch's inaugural convention kicks off today in San Francisco. The show boasts live streams to watch, games to play, and plenty of panels to view. TwitchCon runs through Saturday.

27 New Releases

- › Lego Dimensions (PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, 360)

29 New Releases

- › NBA 2K16 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- › NBA Live 16 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- › Samurai Warriors 4-II (PS4, PS3, Vita, PC)
- › Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5 (PS4, Xbox One)

2015



Photo: Przemek Dabrowski

Rising To The Top Of The RPG Pack

Eight years ago, a tiny Polish developer licensed BioWare's Aurora engine for a property almost unknown outside of Poland. This year, it released the third game in its now-acclaimed *Witcher* series, selling over four million copies. We talked to CD Projekt RED CEO **Marcin Iwiński** about how this underdog developer became one of the top dogs.

What is your philosophy as a studio?

Our mission is to take our passion for games and harness it to make the best role-playing games in the world. [Even with *Witcher 1*,] it was never "Hey, let's just make a small kind of game that will sell in Eastern Europe."

We were always aiming for a big RPG and to make it interesting for a worldwide audience.

Gamers always have the choice of not buying your game or pirating it. If a gamer wants to check out your game, there are millions of ways to access

it, especially if you're talking about a single-player game like ours. The only way we can convince them is to be positive and go the extra mile, and that's what we are doing

All of the *The Witcher 3* DLC is free.

Why is that important to you as a company?

I think first it's important to distinguish between what we consider DLC and what we consider an expansion. For a good two or three years we were saying that the small bits, a sword here or maybe a small quest there, should be done as a post-release thank you. That's what we call DLC. Whereas the expansions are meaningful AAA content expansions with a story where we spend months developing. That's what we would appreciate gamers pay for. So this is the distinction.

When people go and buy a full-priced game, it's a big investment. So at this point in time we are forming a certain relationship. As we have proven, starting with *The Witcher 1*, we are not a hit-and-run company. Some people have this strategy: "Let's milk the franchise and let's get out of it, or let's kill it, or we'll worry later." We don't. This is our baby. This is a super important world we have created and spent the last 10 years working on, so we should be right every single moment, every single time.

After finishing *The Witcher 3*, what made you decide to create expansions?

We never did that in the past, but mostly because we needed to step up with the tech. After *Witcher 1* we realized we have to do our own stuff. [BioWare's Aurora Engine] gave us a lot of acceleration at the very beginning, but at the end, we had rewritten around 90 percent of the code and it was a very strange, fragile structure. Instead of building an expansion we said, "We have to do our own tech." Then, on *Witcher 2*, we did PC first, then the Xbox. Again we said we would like to do more here, but we have to get the tech ready for the next-gen. Finally, *The Witcher 3* can benefit from that. Now we can actually put people to work on additional content. I think it's cool to tell some more stories.

I think some companies question our business approach – that we have given such a huge game. We could have cut out a bit, and maybe sell it afterwards. But that's not our way of doing things. We are honest and generous. Actually, the sheer size of the game we have created has surprised us a bit as well.

That brings up a good point: You have established a really good relationship with your fans. How valuable has that been for you?

If you look back, we have actually employed quite a few of those people. It was on *Witcher 1*, one or two guys

rebalanced the game. It was a much better job than we did, actually. We said, "Wow, these guys know more about our game."

It's important to have a good relationship with fans, and we definitely work hard on that. It's not perfect, but in our case, I think it's quite good. They're passionate. They care. And they tell you straight to your face if you do something wrong. So we treat this feedback with respect.

How important is it that you have creative control over your own projects?

I think *The Witcher 3* wouldn't be *The Witcher 3* without this. This is the product we want to make, and some publisher wouldn't consider our decisions sane. They'd say, "Hey, chop part of it. It'll be faster, cheaper, easier." And yeah, I could probably agree with them that'd be faster and easier but it wouldn't be this game that we wanted to make.

It's paid off, but the risk is very high. But I'm glad to say it's our risk and we'll be taking risks like that in the future because it's fun and that's what we're here for. We don't want to make just a "me too" kind of game.

The *Witcher 3* was very much pegged as a way to bring closure to Geralt's journey. Have you guys decided what's next for *The Witcher* series?

Honestly speaking, we have not. It deserves some rest. The past 10 years the team has been working on swords and castles and medieval Slavic monsters, so I think it's time for some guns, androids, and some ammo. And a necropolis. So this is what we'll be working on. We definitely are not annualizing a franchise or anything – it's about the experience. We all have an interesting concept, I think. The world of the *Witcher* is gigantic and it's great to tell these stories, but I don't know when this will happen.

How has *The Witcher 3* influenced the early work you're doing on your next project, *Cyberpunk*?

I think we definitely learned a lot about the scale, about developing on three platforms at the same time, and making this huge-scale experience. So we'll take all that we've learned and we'll apply it to *Cyberpunk*. We'll really push to lift the bar even higher.

The first two *Witchers* are very much in the PC realm. The *Witcher 3* was your first simultaneous release for consoles and PC. How did it work out?

We are definitely very, very happy. I am

very sorry I cannot comment more, but the game is selling very, very well. I'll maybe answer a question that you actually didn't ask, but it's out there. "Why did you betray PC, you should have made *The Witcher 3* only for PC?"

Without the consoles there wouldn't be *The Witcher 3* the way it is, because it is extremely hard to finance a game of such scale just for one platform. The second thing is that we wanted to make a game for as many players as possible. If you look at certain markets, the consoles dominate. If you do not develop for consoles, then many people will not play your game.

So it was a great decision having the console gamer in mind, who is also more demanding. There was a learning curve in having to deliver this proper experience that made the game better. The PC audience is way more forgiving – if you make a quirky interface, they'll say, "Okay, we have to play with the keyboard the other way around. No problem." Console gamers are all like, "Either it plays or it doesn't."

What would you like to see improved within the industry going forward?

I don't want to be an industry oracle, but I have one simple dream for the people out there who run the companies: Just be more in touch with gamers. Whatever gamers want. That's not like, "Hey, this guy on this forum said he wants this and that." No, no. It's more like analyzing certain trends and being in touch. Communicating directly to them.

Games are all about passion, and if you're passionate together with your gamers then they'll all be back. But the fundamental question is who are [developers and publishers] developing and selling these games to and for? This is lost in translation quite often.

What can we expect for CD Projekt Red in the future?

Expect the unexpected. [Laughs] I expect continued support for *Wild Hunt* – we still have quite a few things up our sleeve that we cannot talk about right now. Then it's *Cyberpunk*, and we'll talk about it when we're ready.

Did you ever expect *Gwent* (*The Witcher 3* card game) to take off the way it has?

I was expecting this one. You know what? I'll tell you a little story. When we were finishing the game, Adam Badowski and I were talking a lot. He said, "S---, I'm a little bit concerned because when I go up there, Conrad [the director of the project], he's not testing the game as much as he should. He's just constantly playing *Gwent*."

We are taking it humbly, but it was super popular in the studio. Some people played more *Gwent* than they played the game. ☺

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1994

After importing games like *Day of the Tentacle* and *King's Quest* in low quantities for extra money, Iwinski starts a distribution company with former classmate Michał Kiciński called CD Projekt.

1998

Iwinski, a fan of *Baldur's Gate*, inks a deal with Interplay to localize the game in Poland.

2000

Interplay provides CD Projekt a PS2 dev kit to port *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*. The deal falls apart, but gives CD Projekt the itch to develop its own games.

2001

When the rights to Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* novels become available, Iwinski convinces Sapkowski the books would make a great video game and forms CD Projekt RED.

2004

CD Projekt gets access to BioWare's Aurora engine and BioWare gives them space in its E3 booth to demo *The Witcher*.

2007

The Witcher ships and receives plenty of praise, selling enough to fund the next entry, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, another hit.

2009

CD Projekt opens its DRM-free digital distribution service, GOG.com.

2015

CD Projekt RED launches its biggest game to date, *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*. It's the company's most successful game yet.

EON17-X



While some gaming notebooks are getting thinner and lighter for the sake of portability at the sacrifice of some horsepower, the EON17-X

hunkers down with an overclocked desktop chip to deliver uncompromised performance. This power-sucking beast won't last long away from a wall outlet, but you won't mind when you're cruising through Los Santos in Grand Theft Auto V with the graphics settings dialed to 11. The 4.5GHz Intel i7 4790K processor, Nvidia GTX 980M video card, and 16GB of DDR3 RAM handled everything we threw on high settings at it without succumbing to a low framerate. We have only a few minor knocks against this world-class gaming notebook. The Onkyo speakers don't have the depth to stand up to big explosions or booming base, and the Spartan chassis, while durable, lacks style. When you're paying top dollar, you want the total package, but if you can live with these hang-ups the EON17-X won't let you down

when you need it most — on the virtual battlefield.

VERY GOOD

Starting at \$1,735 originpc.com

by Matt Bertz, Matt Miller, and Ben Reeves



1 Star Wars: Armada

Imperial Star Destroyers and Rebel Frigates take center stage in this tactical miniatures game from Fantasy Flight. You command a fleet of massive ships as squadrons of Tie Fighters and X-Wings zip around the field. The innovative maneuver mechanic and unique ship properties provide complexity, and the large-scale battles are a treat to watch. For players who can't wait to see the inevitable ship battles of Episode VII, Armada fills the void.

\$99.95 fantasyflightgames.com

2 GoPro Hero4 Session

GoPro cameras are the most portable way to record the most thrilling moments of your life in HD. The newest iteration takes the company's pedigree for durability and stuffs it into a waterproof cube that's 50 percent smaller and 40 percent lighter than other Hero4 cameras. The Session's internal battery delivers around two hours of recording time, while a companion ball socket mount helps you find the perfectly positioned shot. The Session doesn't record in 4K, but a simple one-button interface and mobile companion app make it easy to take 8MP photos or 1080p video at 60 frames per second of your extreme sports antics or less dangerous home movies.

\$399 shop.gopro.com



ARMADA

BY ERNEST CLINE

Zack Lightman always daydreamed about having a space-faring adventure, but when he spies a flying saucer ripped straight out of the world's most popular online game, he gets caught up in an adventure that's a little too real. Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* follow-up is bursting at the seams with pop culture references and video game trivia.

\$12.99

armadabook.com

CRYPT OF THE NECRODANCER OFFICIAL SOUNDTRACK

The soundtrack to *Brace Yourself Games'* rhythm/roguelike mash-up feels like a dancer, chiptune version of *Super Meat Boy*, which isn't surprising since composer Danny Baranowsky worked on both games. These 42 tracks (including 27 unique songs) will keep you bouncing through the night no matter what dungeon you're lost in.

\$9.99

dbsoundworks.bandcamp.com

SECOND QUEST BY TEVIS THOMPSON & DAVID HELLMAN

Inspired by games like *The Legend of Zelda*, artist David Hellman (Braid) and author Tevis Thompson teamed up to tell the story of a young girl named Azalea who dares to uncover the mysterious history of her floating homeland. This loving meditation on classic video game tropes explores the real cost of courage.

\$10.00 (ebook).

\$25.00 (hardcover)

secondquestcomic.com

THE WIRE: THE COMPLETE SERIES

HBO's groundbreaking dive into the drug-infested streets of West Baltimore breaks the police procedural mold, delivering a gritty yet earnest look at modern law enforcement and how it relates to other city institutions. Own all five seasons of some of the best serialized television for the first time on Blu-ray.

\$199

store.hbo.com





DESTINY: THE TAKEN KING

Bungie Reinvents Its Shooter From The Ground Up

Destiny has been a divisive game. Disappointed with a lackluster story and more abbreviated content than they had hoped, some players abandoned Bungie's latest project only days after launch. Others have stayed, pouring hundreds of hours into the fledgling game, embracing the taut gunplay, beautiful art, and social engagement. No matter which side you fall on, it's safe to assume you have an opinion about Destiny, and Bungie has been listening. After two smaller downloadable packs, The Taken King arrives this September, hovering in a nebulous space between expansion and sequel. We visited Bungie for two full days of playing the game and talking to its creators, and discovered a project far more ambitious than any of us expected.

by
Matt Miller

PLATFORM

PlayStation 4 • Xbox One
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

STYLE

Online Multiplayer Shooter

PUBLISHER

Activision

DEVELOPER

Bungie

RELEASE

September 15



A FRESH START

The Taken King is bigger than you think. Two previous expansions have set our expectations of three to five story missions each, a few new multi-player maps, and a raid or arena for end-game engagement, along with new legendary and exotic gear to keep the collection experience alive. The Taken King has far more expansive additions in store.

The September release does two things. It reorganizes the existing experience, from the flow of quests to the way leveling and gear upgrades work. Then it offers a wealth of new gameplay experiences more extensive than both of the previous expansions combined. New quests provide a more meaningful sense of involvement and progression.

Story missions are deeper, more narratively driven, and often buffered by cinematics. The end-game experience — where Destiny's most devoted players spend the bulk of their time — is far more than a grind-focused afterthought, and comprises the entire second act of The Taken King's storytelling and gameplay arc.

My first inkling of The Taken King's scope comes as I boot up my Titan on Bungie's test server and launch the opening cinematic. An unfamiliar voice narrates a musing on the nature of the Traveler, and I realize I'm hearing the return of my Ghost, a character absent from The Dark Below and House of Wolves releases. While the voice has a similar cadence, it's undoubtedly a new actor. Nolan North has



New armor and weapons offer a wealth of new customization gameplay

The Taken

The Taken are a whole new alien threat premiering for the first time in *The Taken King*. Oryx rips beings out of this dimension, burns away their essence, and redeploys them as members of a tortured dark army. They return in the shape of their former selves, but with entirely new powers that justify their position as the fifth major alien threat in *Destiny*.

After several hours confronting these new enemies, the pervading sensation of combat against them is that of being overwhelmed. The Taken show up in force, demonstrate aggressive battle tactics, and some literally multiply if left to their own devices. Their transparent glow feels appropriately otherworldly, an impression only accentuated upon their death animation in which they seem to be sucked back through a tear in space into whatever hell from which they emerged.

I saw several varieties of Taken combatants, but more are likely hidden throughout the *Destiny* universe.

- Taken Captains wear a solar shield, and throw out slow-moving orbs of darkness that blind you.
- Taken Knights fling down an area effect scorch that demands you flee their vicinity.
- Taken Centurions shoot tracking shots that curve around corners to strike.
- Taken Wizards are like necromancers, summoning shadow thralls to charge your location.
- Taken Psions blast away at you for a few seconds before spitting in two, doubling the threat.
- Taken Vandal's deploy a shield much like a Defender Titan, except they can shoot out of it, and they heal while inside.
- Taken Phalanxes have an impulse blast that can knock you backward, often in furiously deployed near-death drops.
- Taken Thralls te report about the battle field like angry velociraptors.

joined the cast to voice your ever-present companion, and his commentary is a regular accompaniment throughout the upcoming story. For the sake of consistency, North is also re-recording all the original dialogue from the base game. "We wanted to actually go back and take all of the Year One content and weave it into 'questification,'" says creative director Luke Smith. "To not weave it in would lead to this abrupt experience, where you play DLC 1 and 2, and suddenly the game-interaction model changes. We wanted Noan North's version of the Ghost to wake you up at the start of the journey at level one and follow you all the way to level forty."

Opening thoughts from the Ghost flow seamlessly into

the single most epic cinematic yet seen in the series. It's a declaration I don't make lightly, and one that I don't expect anyone to refute once they've seen it. The Awoken Queen has gone to war against Oryx's encroaching fleet. In a colossal space dogfight out among the rings of Saturn, Prince Uldren leads squadrons of Awoken fighters into a hail of weapon fire and destruction. Aboard her flagship, Queen Mara Sov joins in the fight, showing for the first time what makes her such a feared leader. Without spoiling the conclusion, the titanic outer-space showdown reveals both the might of the Awoken and the overwhelming threat posed by the arrival of Oryx. You've murdered his son, Crota, and he's here for revenge.

With the stakes of the conflict established, my Titan heads to Phobos, one of Mars' moons. Upon landing, regular conversation between my Ghost and the Vanguard members back on Earth illustrate the increased focus on character and story. As I explore, occasional objects in the world offer a chance for a deeper narrative. "You're going to hear these cool little audio pips, and it indicates something is scan-able nearby," Smith says. "The Ghost becomes this opt-in purveyor of lore. He's going to tell you about a weird worm, or a creepy statue, and maybe it's going to lead to some interaction between him and another character, like Cayde or Eris." My first scan is of a dead Cabal soldier, and my Ghost relates additional detail on the creature's military regiment.

Newly composed music swells through these early story missions, and the fighting is intense. The new Taken foes

may have the shapes of existing enemies, but after being whisked away to Oryx's dark dimension, they've returned with potent new powers that challenge players to fight in new ways. Rift-like windows into this other dimension are peppered along my route, reinforcing the threat of something unknowable and alien intersecting into the world. After a climactic fight against Oryx's foes, the collapsing base forces me to flee to my ship with the Taken hot on my heels.

With a taste of conflict against the Taken, I head back to Earth. A dedicated cinematic scene involving the Vanguard leaders offers more character development than all of the base game's storyline put together, establishing relationships, antagonism, and humor amongst the guardians' leaders. While the Vanguard discuss the Taken threat, it's time for me to take a closer look at my revamped Titan.

I Didn't Like Destiny. Why Should I Come Back?

The Taken King represents Bungie's most fervent effort not only to draw in new players, but also appeal to previous players who left at some point in the past. If the sci-fi universe, combat, or focus on character development didn't appeal, I can save you some time. None of that has changed.

However, between incremental patches and adjustments on the way in The Taken King, several other features have improved. Here are some of the most important changes already made or that will be in place by September 15.

- Progression has been reworked entirely since the game launched. Leveling from 1 to 40 is now based entirely on your own actions.
- A new behind-the-scenes reward system pays attention to the gear and weapons you already have, and not only attempts to avoid giving the same reward multiple times, but targets you for new loot that will be valuable for progression.
- The Cryptarch more reliably provides rewards that match the engrams you give him.
- Quests provide meaningful story progression, and clearly trackable paths through all the game's content, thereby lessening the grind.
- You can carry more bounties at any one time, and turn them in without returning to the bounty giver.
- The Crucible has improved matchmaking, and a mercy rule ends matches early when any given contest is dramatically misbalanced.
- Crucible heavy and special ammo drops and economies have been reworked to be more understandable and usable.
- Weapons have been balanced across the board, with the aim to eliminate the dominance of just a few weapons, and make every weapon type a compelling choice.
- Whether your gauge is number of Crucible maps, exotic weapons, or playable missions, Destiny now has more than twice as much content as the original release. While the Taken King introduces the first fully exploreable new gameplay area, the new story mission zones, raids, and arena add substantial real estate to uncover.



THE NEW GUARDIAN

The developers I speak to at Bungie are focused on delivering fun and rewarding character progression for all players. They want to address the hopes and desires of a very active (and vocal) fan base, but also strive to make the game accessible for new players and draw back in players who originally disliked something about the game. One big stumbling block has been the hard-to-explain leveling system that begins after 20, which was notorious for its unnecessary stalls and roadblocks.

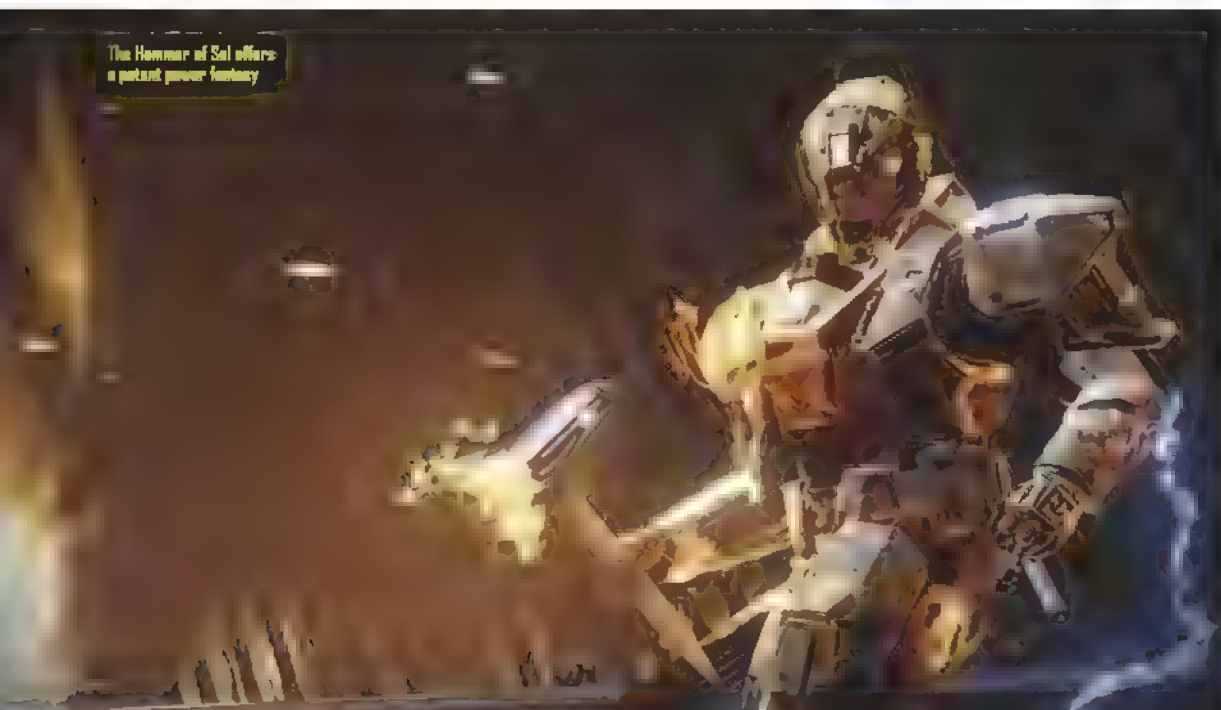
The Taken King resets the system in favor of a more unified passage from level one to the new level cap of 40. Experience points from missions, bounties, and enemy kills now contribute directly to progression, even after level 20. "Character level should be deterministic and earnable by a player in a way they understand," Smith says.

Simultaneously, gear continues to play an important factor in the developing power of your guardian. The light system is being revised for a streamlined and consistent experience from 1 to 40. "As your character level is going up, it's letting you find and equip more powerful gear," Smith says. "The conflation of gear and character level led to this place where your identity was determined by things outside of your control. We don't want to do that. We don't want only four slots that contribute to this number. We want every piece of gear that you get to have the potential to be something that excites you or makes you more powerful." Weapons, armor, class items, and even your Ghost shell all offer perk customization as well as increased power and light for your hero.

Existing Year One legendary weapons and armor are still equipable, but expect to find gear with higher attack and defense values with which to replace it very early. Those items may even be white and green commons. Bungie wants Year Two to reinvigorate the collection and experimentation experience of the game, and that can't happen if everyone is still using Vision of Confluence. "It's hard to look at Fatebringer and imagine not using it; it's one of my favorite guns in the game," Smith admits. "But at the same time,

I definitely feel like some of our players are ready to play with some new toys. And we've built a whole bunch of new toys. There are definitely some weapons that you are going to find better versions of—there's going to be something that replaces that sniper rifle that you love."

As your guardian ascends through new white, green, blue, and eventually, purple armor and weapons, Bungie wants players to engage with the gear that appeals to them both visually and functionally. As an alternative to using or sharding your new high-powered legendary weapons and armor, you can also improve an item you like by sacrificing another piece from the same gear slot. I saw a work-in-progress version of the system, and while the details and name of this process are still being finalized, the intent was clear. "It enables a player to customize the way they want to look, and the weapons they want to use," Smith says. The mechanic extends to exotics as well, allowing players to power up exotic weapons and armor that might have a lower attack or defense value.





Other changes to the character screen are less obvious. Intelligence, Discipline, and Strength abilities now have numbered tiers to strive toward. "Tiers are digital thresholds that you cross to reduce the cooldown on your core three powers," Smith explains. "Instead of a percentage, we want to tell you the time in seconds that your ability is going to come back in. It will be a lot of fun for people who like to tinker with their build."

Your choice of whether to wear your helmet in social spaces now also extends to your character screen. Equipable emotes are now available below your emblem selection. Holding L2 on the pause screen gives an instant glimpse at the energy types equipped on each weapon. New item and subclass visual icons have been designed for quick recognition at a glance. Everything has been reorganized for ease of use and freedom of customization.

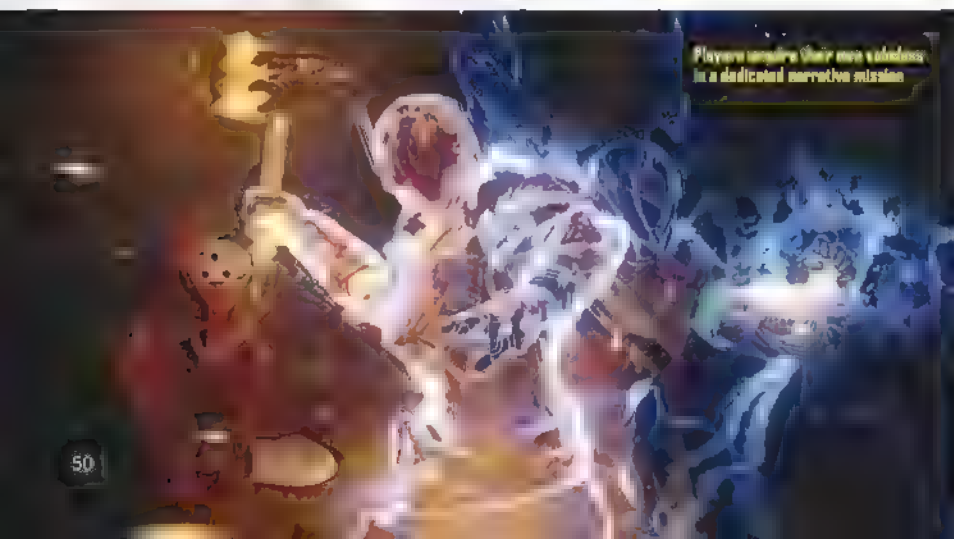
BACK TO THE TOWER

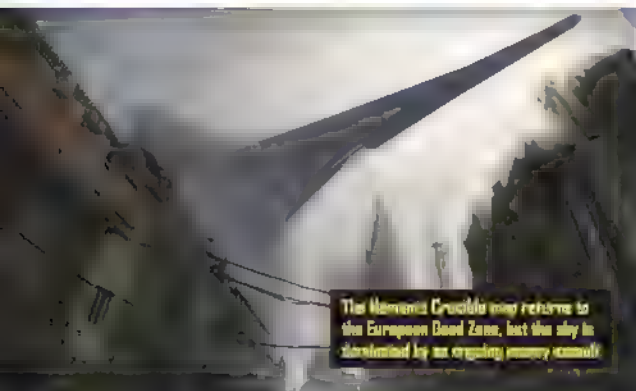
The Tower may not look very different in *The Taken King*, but Bungie retooled nearly every vendor and interaction under the hood. The biggest change is the overwhelming number of available quests that unlock at set points throughout progression. Some show up after this first mission, others only start after the story has concluded, and still others are dependent upon finding mysterious items or dismantling a particular weapon.

Quest lines change the flow of the game, providing narrative roots to your actions. Quests from the ominous Eris Morn lead to the rediscovery of a forgotten weapon type. Quests from the Vanguard members carry the main story forward. Even the Cryptarch and Gunsmith might have new tasks connected to them. In every case, each quest step is noted on a dedicated page of your character screen, and you can choose which quests to track on your HUD with the press of a button.

Quests don't just add new content, but reorganize older content. The base game's *Sword of Crota* mission now flows seamlessly into *The Dark Below* storyline. The *Vestian Outpost* opens up after you meet the *Awoken Queen* for the first time. All of the original missions have been reordered, contextualized, and placed within a larger quest framework. Even older subclasses, like my Titan's Striker and Defender subclasses, have dedicated quest lines that explain their use and place within the world.

Beyond quests, the Tower holds a number of other fun surprises. The Gunsmith has dramatically increased in importance. He has his own reputation meter, which can be leveled up by testing out common prototype weapons in the field. "You can check





out these weapons – you’re borrowing them,” Smith says. “Test weapons have a built-in challenge, like kill Hive on the Dreadnaught, or use this sniper rifle to get headshots in the Crucible. You can check out as many as you want at a time, up to your inventory capacity. It’s like a bounty that’s built into the weapon.”

Hit a certain reputation level with Banshee by testing his guns, and he’ll open up Armsday purchases. Once a week you can pay glimmer to order a new legendary weapon – like a Suros pulse rifle – and on Wednesday that weapon arrives with a random set of perks.

To go along with Armsday, The Taken King introduces weapon foundries as a way to allow further customization of your loadout. “The weapon foundries came from this notion that we’d created some pretty awesome exotics, like Suros Regime and Hard Light,” Smith says. “We wanted to do something with these foundries that we had this fiction and lore for. If humanity was in a struggle for its survival, weapon manufacturing would become part and parcel for what that economy looks like. Foundries were built after unearthing all these old exotics, which the players did in last year’s game.”

Häkke, Suros, and Omolon brand weapons each have their own signature visual style, but they also organize their action and stat talents in distinct ways, so as you level them up they shoot in fundamentally different ways. For instance, Häkke pulse rifles shoot four bursts instead of three, and Omolon



The Life Of An Exotic

The Taken King is awash in new Exotic weapons and gear. During my time at Bungie, I saw reference to over a dozen new gold-tier weapons, and around a half dozen new armor pieces for each class, though I suspect there may be more exotics I didn’t glimpse. One awesome auto rifle shoots blasts of chain lightning. A sniper rifle I saw blinds nearby enemies on a precision hit. One of my personal favorites is an intriguing new Pulse Rifle called No Time To Explain that answers the desire for a high-level version of the Stranger’s Rifle, nailing precision hits with the arc weapon refuels bullets directly to the magazine.

Exotics now come with an intrinsic perk upon acquisition – the defining perk that sets it apart, like the Helm of Saint-14’s blinding ability. This readjustment even applies to older exotics that you acquire after the Taken King launches.

As for new exotics, many of them are now tied to involved quest lines that echo and enhance the established idea of exotic bounties. For instance, I’m told of one exotic weapon that is gained in part through extensive exploration of Oryx’s fortress-like Dreadnaught. Hidden pieces are scattered across the ship, each with a piece of a story (like Ghost fragments) that helps to flesh out the lore of the ultra-powerful weapon.

To get a better sense of the new focus on exotics and their acquisition, Bungie provided us an in-depth look at one of the new weapons: the Sleeper Simulant. Our conversation illuminated just how much work goes into just one of these weapons. The imposing armament (pictured above) is a fusion rifle that sits in the heavy weapon slot instead of the special slot. Effectively a portable rail cannon, the gun charges up a laser blast that over-penetrates through enemy targets and bounces off walls; subsequent upgrades increase how many times the laser rebounds. The prototype visual styling of the weapon is inspired by modern-day cutting-edge technology, like early designs for stealth jets, or the NASA Mars rover.

A dedicated quest line of multiple missions must be completed in order to get the Sleeper Simulant. The story of the weapon sees players tracking down ancient relics from humanity’s golden age, and returning them to Banshee. These trigger a memory in the old Gunslinger that opens up an odyssey to repair and reactivate the long-forgotten weapon. Along the way, some puzzles may be hard for any one individual player to figure out on their own. Even the initial acquisition of the quest line comes from a clue you find hidden somewhere in the Destiny universe.

For more on Sleeper Simulant, check out gameinformer.com/thetakenking this month; we’ll have a dedicated article on the design, art, and balance of this intriguing weapon.

focuses on energy-based attacks. “It’s about making the guns look different, but also feel different. We want players to develop an affinity for these weapons, and develop a favorite,” Smith says.

Craving between vendors, I note that new Legendary Marks streamline and replace older Crucible and Vanguard marks as the primary way to purchase legendary gear from vendors. Throughout my hours of play, several activities provide these new marks as a reward. In another move toward streamlining, the three class-specific armor upgrade items, like Hadronic Essence, are replaced with the singular Armor Materials item – making it easy to have a shared pool for all the guardians on your account.

My Titan visits the New Monarchy vendor to discover that the three factions now allow you to pledge allegiance (only one at a time) in order to gain reputation with them. You're no longer forced to wear a class item you don't like just to gain the rep you need. He also lets me turn in motes of light, weapon parts, armor materials, or ammo synth to gain rep – a handy tool for leveling up a faction for those players who have an abundance of any of the above.

Near the guardian outfitter, I come across a new computer console dedicated to shaders. In its display, I can pick up any shader I've already acquired on my account. It also shows me all the shaders I don't have, and exactly what I need to do to get them. The same sort of system is available for emblems. Both functions should provide at least some relief to overstuffed character vaults, if not the full overhaul players are hoping for. "We're still bumping into a technical

limitation for vault space," Smith says. "We are exploring options for getting stuff out of players' inventories via these kiosks that we've placed around the tower, but we're still working towards a solution that we're excited about."

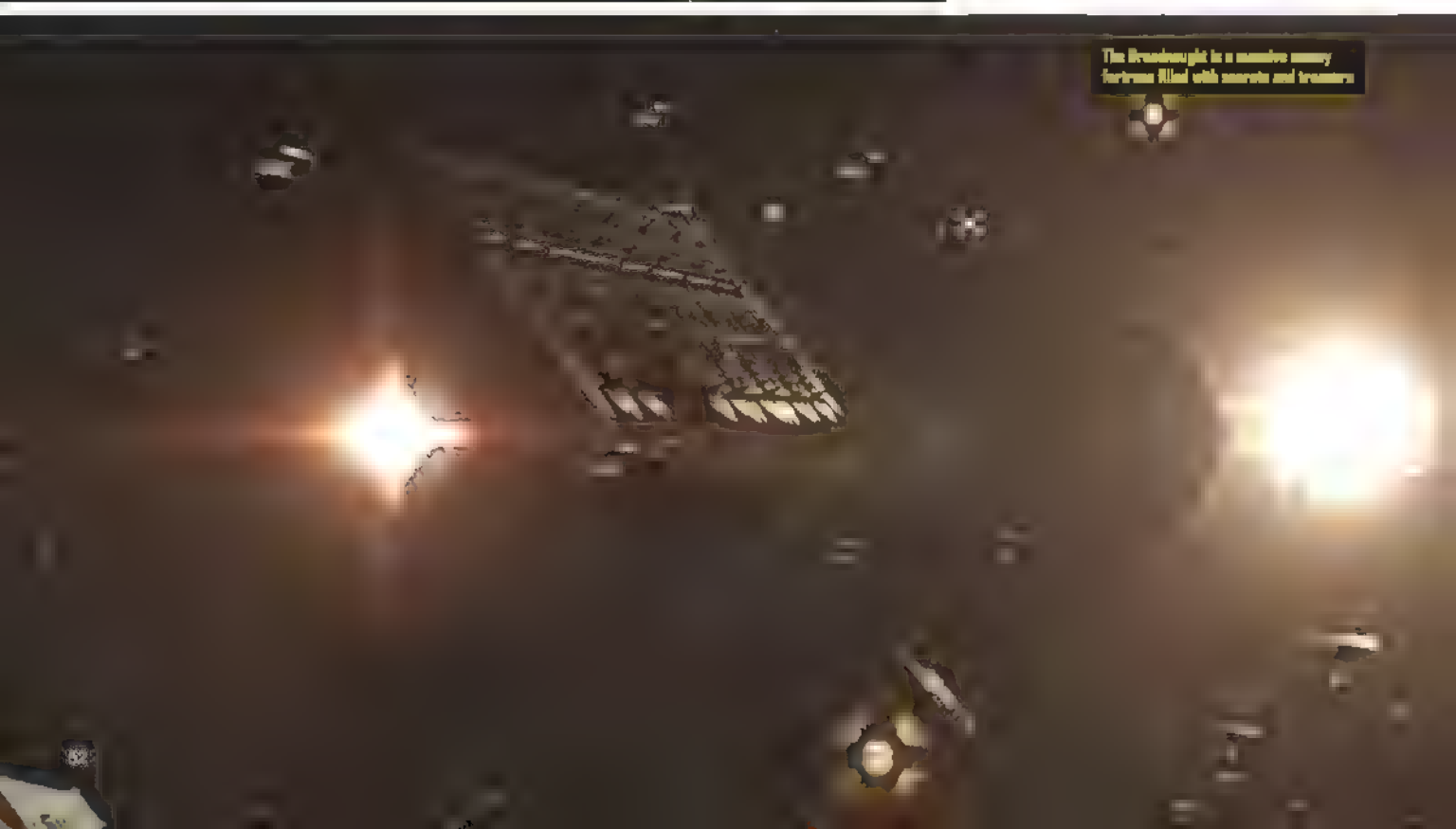
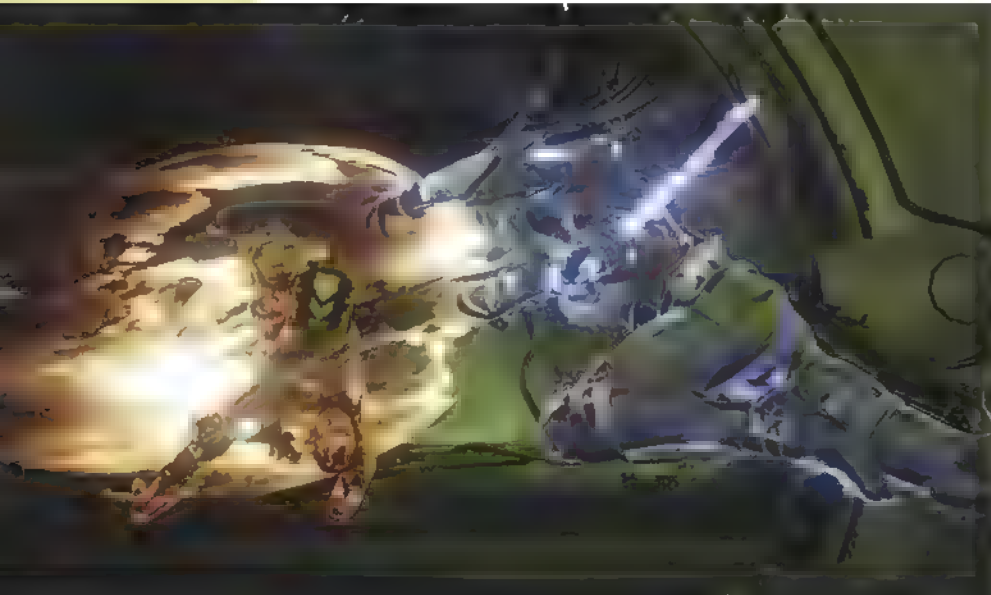
As I'm bouncing from vendor to vendor, a tap of the triangle button changes my displayed weapon – which gun looks best with my current armor? The question is forgotten as I meet with Commander Zavala – it's time to work for my new subclass.

COMPLETING THE TRIANGLE

Every class in The Taken King has a potent new subclass to acquire and upgrade, and Zavala offers a dedicated quest line to introduce me to the Titan's solar build. To continue to defend the Last City, Titans need new powers to hold the line against the Darkness, and those powers can be found

among a rogue mercenary clan of Titans called the Sunbreakers. I head to Venus for the first step of tracking them down in a dedicated (albeit brief) story mission. A second short mission follows on Mercury, the story contents of which I won't spoil here.

It's enough to say that the Sunbreaker quest is built to give some story background, but also sneakily teach you how to handle the new subclass. The mission includes a fight against a large number of Vex. To stand a chance, your new Super goes into overdrive, recharging only seconds after completion, and letting you fling out flaming hammers like they're going out of style. Instead of taking days to learn the feel of the new Super, you get familiar with its usage in just a few minutes. Moreover, a dedicated fight lets you indulge in the power fantasy of a raging god of fire whose hammer one-shots whole squads of enemy troops.



The Breachpoint is a massive enemy fortress filled with secrets and treasures.



Later in the day, I try out the Hunter Nightstalker missions – which focus on tracking down a lone-wolf hunter who has gone missing – and the Warlock Stormcaller quest, a shamanistic ritual in which Vanguard Ikora Rey indoctrinates you into the power of the storm. Both echo the Sunbreaker quest in tutorial function while establishing the narrative behind these new powers.

With the addition of these three new subclasses, every class now has access to each of Destiny's elemental forces: arc, solar, and void. Having played with all of them, it's hard to separate my sensation of unbridled enthusiasm from the excitement of something new. I feel safe in declaring everyone is in for a treat with their new abilities. The Hunter's support-oriented Nightstalker abilities provide a whole new flavor; pinning whole groups of enemies (or guardians) is a blast, and I'm amazed at the utility of both the new smoke grenade and the handy dodge.

While they might not admit it, Bungie players regularly cry out "Palpatine!" as the new Warlock super triggers, sending

a roving engine of electrical destruction surging across the battlefield. The Titan's Hammer of Sol feels like the ultimate battle cry call-out. In one mission, a whole squad of Taken emerge on a bridge in my path, and I trigger the super. The distant sound of hammer against anvil rings in time with my Titan brandishing his weapon, and all hell breaks loose.

THE EXPANDED CRUCIBLE

After delving into the story content, it's time for some competitive play. The Taken King introduces at least three new modes of play. As revealed at this year's E3, Rift is an objective-focused experience about carrying a ball of light across the map to the enemy's rift. Mayhem goes for total chaos by dramatically increasing the recharge of supers, grenades, and charged melees. Zone Control offers a new variation on the familiar Control game type, in which kills don't matter. Teams score points only for taking and holding control points, putting the full focus on the objective over personal glory.





I tried all eight of the new maps. With a year of experience informing structure, these new Crucible maps take more chances on interesting mechanics and design, offering new challenges for dedicated Crucible players. "At a high level, we always make it a high priority to visit new and exotic places in the Crucible that you either won't have seen before, or maybe you're getting a sneak preview of something you might see in the future," says Crucible design lead Lars Bakken.

The catapults of the Mars-based Crossroads map recall Bungie's previous work on Halo, and its abundant man cannons. The PlayStation-exclusive Sector 618 challenges players to lots of jumping between gun battles, as the center of the map is dominated by platforms. Ghost Ship brings the Crucible into the Reef for the first time, and players should notice low grav effects on physics objects and ragdolls as they wander through an abandoned Fallen Ketch ship. Bannerfall plays out on one of the Last City's other towers, and offers an excuse for fighting guardians in a space that

looks just like the game's familiar social space. Frontier is a showpiece Rift map set out beyond the edge of the Last City, with a dangerous sniping lane down the middle, and a bridge that acts as a potent bottleneck for skirmishes. Exile takes us to a Hive prison cell deep in Oryx's fleet; three main lanes traverse the map, including an outside path looking out on Saturn's rings, and a lower level that demands players think about what's both above and below. Memento returns to Earth's European Dead Zone for a highly vertical map among the ruins of the golden age. My personal favorite new battlefield is Vertigo, a floating Vex platform above the surface of Mars that includes a devious one-way teleporter.

While a wealth of new maps and more object ve-based game modes are welcome, many players will be even more thankful for some of the less obvious changes on the way to the Crucible. It now has dedicated quest lines built to introduce new and returning players to the best way to play. "In The Dark Below and House of Wolves, you had these specific quest lines that introduced story characters," Bakken



says. "What if we took that approach to the Crucible, and had Shaxx, the faction leaders, and even Shaxx's quartermaster pushing you through these quests and introducing you to the Crucible – something that we did a terrible job of doing when we launched Destiny?"

"We also rethought what a Crucible bounty is – they're much simpler and faster to complete," says senior designer Andrew Weidon. "When we give you a daily bounty, you should be able to go pick them up and get all of them done." At long last, bounties that can't be completed on a given day (like playing Salvage when that game type isn't an option) will no longer show up. Every single day, there is one bounty specifically for your class, helping to encourage more varied subclass play. Fireteam bounties encourage you to enter the Crucible with your friends. Two bounties every day are for the featured playlist, helping to ensure players don't miss out on the rewards that come with that game type.

You can also expect on any given day to find one particularly challenging bounty to confront, very much in line with

the kind you see in Iron Banner. Trials of Osiris players have three new bounties every weekend tied to that playlist. The Crucible now includes five weekly bounties as well, each with enviable rewards. Finish all five and you succeed at a sixth weekly bounty that offers a particularly big reward, such as a legendary or exotic weapon.

Players can also expect to encounter more evenly matched opponents. "We've redone our matchmaking algorithm, so now you should be able to get much better matches, and the system should be able to understand you in a much quicker amount of time," Bakken says.

While they likely won't be ready at launch, the team is working hard to find solutions to ongoing problems with cheating and lag switching, especially in regards to the Trials of Osiris, including more automated ways for the system to detect and remove offending parties.

While the matchmaking changes weren't apparent in our play session, several hours with the new Crucible maps left me excited. Taken together with the abundance of maps and modes from the base game, The Dark Below, and House of Wolves (all of which will now be available to all players), time spent in the Crucible feels robust and varied. The new battlefields, bounties, and quests demand players think in new ways about the multiplayer game, and that's just the injection needed a year in.

CONFRONTING THE ENDGAME

Quantifying the story missions of *The Taken King* is tricky, as they're spread across a core campaign, subclass-focused events, exotic quests, and additional tasks that open up later. Eight lengthy story missions frame the opening arc of the narrative, tracking your guardian's infiltration of the Dreadnaught and assault against Oryx. One sequence included a vertigo-inducing platforming sequence as I climbed up one of those looming Cosmodrome colony ship rings. Another favorite moment found me fleeing a horde of Taken soldiers through underground passages of the moon. My infiltration of Oryx's Dreadnaught brought me into contact with a marauding group of Cabal, and their crashed ship. In another mission, as the Vanguard's forward scout, I set up the very beacons I would later use to complete Patrol missions onboard.

The biggest surprise in *The Taken King* is the work that has gone into the endgame once those initial story missions conclude. Previously, story missions carried you up to a certain point, then dumped you into the broader world to grind for progress. In *The Taken King*, the initial batch of story missions to track down and confront Oryx is like the first act of a play, and the second act includes numerous additional story missions, strikes, guided exploration for hidden secrets, player-triggered public events, exotic weapon quests, and the capstone event: a massive new raid entitled *King's Fall*. "The raid coming in *The Taken King* is objectively and emphatically our biggest raid yet," Smith

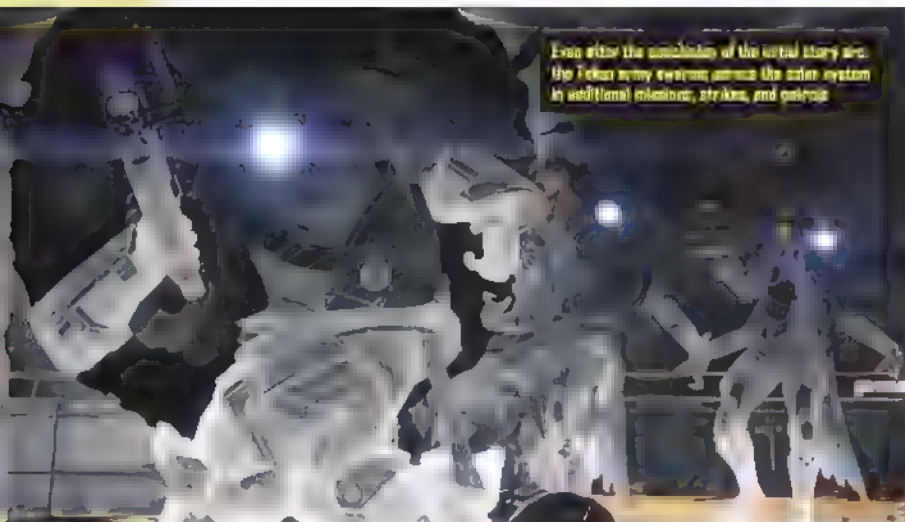
says. "It is a journey that we hope players and their friends are going to remember. It raises the stakes again for what the raid team is expected to deliver."

With the main story arc complete, I returned to the Tower to find several brand new quests, many of which revolved around an event called *The Taken War*. As I quickly discovered, difficulty is tuned up significantly on these narrative events. Without spoiling the fun for veteran players, I undertook a mission into the Vault of Glass called *Unsealed Paradox*, which finally provides some answers regarding the fate of Praedyth. This was the beginning of just one of several discrete story arcs spread across Destiny's locations.

Smith has described the Dreadnaught as an "inscrutable loot-filled fortress," and after a couple of hours wandering through its depths, the description seems apt. Built with the end-game player in mind, this massive new locale is filled with secrets, and I only scratched the surface in my initial explorations. As a home to both Hive and Taken soldiers (along with the occasional invading Cabal) the Dreadnaught has a visual identity that stands apart from previous Hive destinations. If the caverns through Earth's moon were the Hive's missionary church, the Dreadnaught is the home cathedral.

Within the Dreadnaught, towering curved architecture defines cavernous interiors, with statues and shrines arranged for some unknown religious symbolism. Invisible platforms hover in the space between vast chasms, appearing only when you call forth your Ghost for a scan. Hidden alcoves beckon just out of reach of a jump. Locked chests sit in darkened corners with no defined path to access. Strange item pick-ups present a mystery; at one point I picked up a wormspore – a concentrated transmutation that reacts to both light and darkness – but with no idea what it does. The impression is one of secrecy and danger. "Now that you've killed Dracula in his castle, you're going to get to run around and loot it," Smith says. "You're going to see this ongoing feud between Hive, Cabal, and Taken. Through your adventuring on the Hive ship, you're going to find a bunch of arcane objects that you can use to summon ultra bosses. We're experimenting with more treasures to find, and places to explore."

In between excursions to the massive Hive ship, the post-story endgame also includes four new strikes, plus three remixed older strikes that introduce the Taken into previously familiar encounters. Feedback from Year One has led the strike team to design more tactical encounters, albeit without





DREADNAUGHT

Return to Earth

Oryx's Revenge

taking the focus away from fast action. "We saw an appetite for teamwork," says strikes design lead James Tsai. "We realized we didn't need to be quite so protective of players grieving each other. We are always keeping that in the back of our heads, but we're finding that strangers can work together." After playing the new strikes, two features stood out — lots and lots of enemies to match the increased firepower of high-level guardians wielding devastating new subclasses, and the presence of several "raid-light" mechanics to keep things mentally engaging.

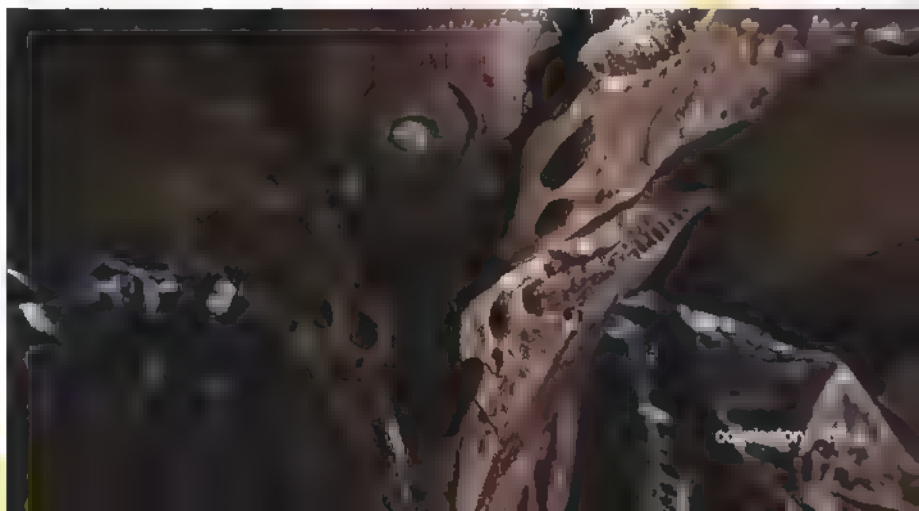
The Fallen Saber strike takes us back to Earth in response to a distress call from the warlord Rasputin, and deep into an underground Seraph Vault to fight a super-powered variation on a Shank amidst an environment of constantly shifting cover. The Shield Brothers strike heads to the Dreadnaught, where two Cabal leaders aim to blow the ship up with you still aboard. The final fight is against not one boss, but two, one with a devastating melee smash and a second with a mortar cannon strapped to his back. The Sunless Cell offers a glimpse into Hive politics, as we hunt down a towering Hive Darkblade named Alak-Hul, who has been imprisoned in a completely dark chamber for rebelling against Oryx — here's hoping you like fighting bosses in utter blackness. Echo Chamber is a PlayStation exclusive, and includes some notable raid-style mechanics. You head to Venus and hunt down the Restorative Mind, a Vex machine seeking to revive the Nexus Mind you destroyed in an earlier strike. The end encounter includes a constantly rotating energy shield, a boss who is only vulnerable after the placement of a special item, and the need to regularly hide behind cover to dodge a devastating gaze attack.

New strikes within The Taken King aim for replayability. Many encounters alter enemy configuration on subsequent playthroughs between two or even three potential fights, often rotating in different enemy species. The team has even recorded multiple versions of the narrations, so subsequent replays offer increased insight into the storyline and background of the strike. As if

to prove that old content isn't immune to this restructuring, Dust Palace, Undying Mind, and Cerberus Vae have all been rebuilt to allow the Taken to suddenly descend into an encounter.

My early sneak peek of The Taken King has made me eager to explore the final version. As to the question of whether The Taken King is an expansion or a full new game, the hours I played left me with an answer that lies somewhere in the middle. Whether it's remixed strikes, redesigned level progression, or a wholly reimagined approach to storytelling and questing, The Taken King transforms the existing game into something new. Simultaneously, the impressive influx of new missions, locations, and gameplay dramatically broadens the scope of the Destiny experience. Fledgling players have a lot to explore on September 15, with a full year's worth of imagination and redesign to fuel their adventures. For veteran guardians, the biggest surprise may be just how fresh this growing universe can feel a year after the adventure began.


For more interviews, videos, and in-depth features on *Destiny: The Taken King*, visit gameinformer.com/thetakenking





THE FIRST-PERSON EXPLORATION BOOM

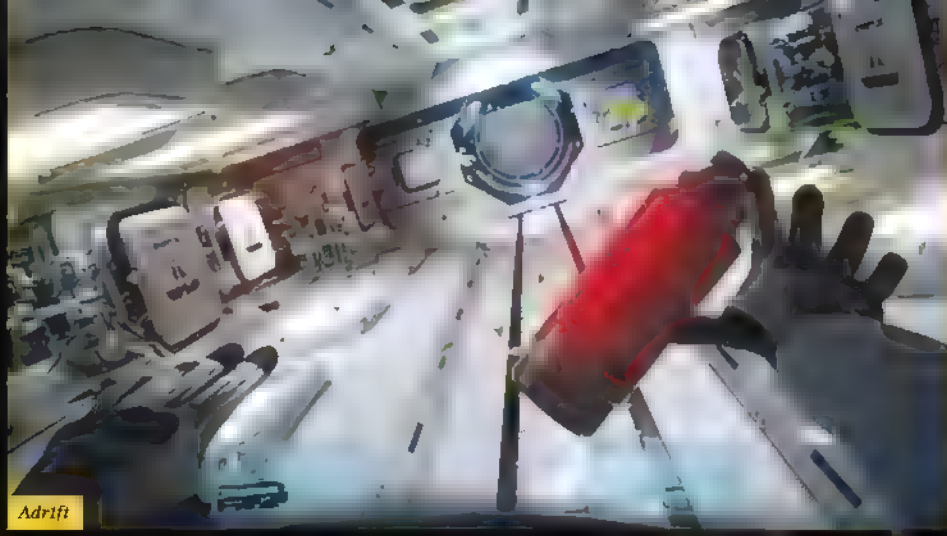
by Kimberley Wallace



A NEW SUBGENRE IS MAKING WAVES FOR NARRATIVE- HUNGRY GAMERS

Take the action out of first-person games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *BioShock*, and what do you have left? Many would argue that there would be nothing left to play, but a few vanguard game developers have proven otherwise.

First-person exploration is far from a new idea in the video game landscape, but in the last few years a different breed of game has surfaced, making the players' only priority these story-focused games and their non-violent gameplay task players with investigating the world around them. *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, and *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* have popularized this trend, engrossing players with atmosphere and story alone. Even more games of this nature are on the horizon, hoping to innovate within this growing subgenre even further.



FINDING SUCCESS AND AN AUDIENCE

Both Gaynor and Pinchbeck had great success with their respective games, winning numerous awards and media praise. Dear Esther received the Independent Games Festival award for excellence in visual arts and The TIGA Game Industry Awards showered it with five awards, ranging from best action/adventure game to best debut. Gone Home earned Game Developers Choice and BAFTA awards for best debut.

While Dear Esther was one of the first games of this nature, Gone Home and The Stanley Parable continued to show the genre's appeal. Gone Home stands at 86 on Metacritic, while The Stanley Parable, a witty game that challenges players' expectations with game design, interactivity, and narrative, has an 88. These games have found an audience due to their accessibility and unique way they involve the player in the narrative.

Both Pinchbeck and Gaynor's first projects encouraged them to make new games in the same genre. Gaynor's studio, Fullbright, is tackling Tacoma, while Pinchbeck and The Chinese Room are releasing Everybody's Gone To The Rapture (see pg. 62). Both feel that seeing this game style have success has encouraged other developers to take the plunge.

"There's a wave we caught with Esther, and because Esther did so well, I think it opened the door for smaller studios who were interested in stories and the world," Pinchbeck says.

Gaynor agrees. He finds game design a very collaborative discipline, as developers are always learning from others' failures and successes. "There are a lot of open design problems out there, so when you see a game that has addressed one of these longstanding design questions in an interesting way, it can be really inspiring," he says.

THE GROWING GAMING LANDSCAPE

The ever-growing indie scene has given developers a chance to take risks. Without corporate overlords to consider, creators are free to experiment and challenge market research, as long as they can afford it. The immersive worlds in mainstream games like System Shock 2 and Fallout 3 paved the way for this emerging subgenre, but it takes a giant leap of faith to remove the second-to-second action and still create a compelling experience.

"If anything, these kind of experiences arose from triple-A games in the first place — smaller teams extracting one piece of bigger games and focusing on it," says Fullbright co-founder Steve Gaynor, who worked on Gone Home, a game set in the '90s about exploring a house and finding out about the people who live there.

Dan Pinchbeck, creative director at The Chinese Room, had a similar epiphany when his studio set out to make its first game. Dear Esther has you traversing an island full of beauty and wonder as you hear voice-overed excerpts from letters. This pioneering

approach started with Pinchbeck asking a simple question. "With Dear Esther, I said, 'We're taking a part of something that exists in most first-person games,' and the question was: 'Rather than it being an aspect, what if that's the whole thing?'" Pinchbeck says.

Designers spend thousands of hours creating details to immerse us, but some players never notice them. "What we do is create these incredible, atmospheric worlds, [then] bombard the player with action," Pinchbeck says. "It felt like there were a whole lot of designers saying, 'What if we just be in the world for a little while because that's really cool in itself?'"

But would that be enough? At the time, it wasn't proven that gamers would want this type of experience. When people picture a game, they envision action — running, jumping, shooting — some sort of visible challenge. Would people really like rummaging through belongings or walking along a beach with narration? It sounds boring on paper, but the true magic came from how these developers set up their worlds to unfold the larger narrative.

Amnesia: The Dark Descent



That's exactly what happened for Tristan Parrish Moore of Broken Window Games. In 2012, he created a prototype that just had you walking around in a real-world environment and interacting with everyday objects. "I just didn't think there would be anyone who would want to buy something like that," Moore says.

He shelved it, but soon games like *Dear Esther*, *The Stanley Parable*, and *Gone Home* launched and saw success, encouraging Moore to return to his prototype. It led to him creating the upcoming *Reflections* (see pg. 63). "What the last couple years have really shown is that there is a real audience out there and lots of people going, 'Yeah, it's enough to be in a world and explore and that's a really rewarding experience,'" Pinchbeck says.

INNOVATING THE GENRE

The fact that these games aren't as expensive or resource-heavy as big triple-A ventures has encouraged more developers to make their own stamp on the subgenre. The competition is tougher than ever, and that's made developers have to up the ante to stand out.

"The advantages of working on a game like this two or three years ago was just novelty," Gaynor says. "On the one hand, it feels less risky—we know people play games like this. But on the other hand, it's just like any other genre of game where there's enough of these out there that you can't rely on the novelty of it. You have to make it one of the very best."

Adam Orth is hoping his team at *Three One Zero* can take the genre to new places with his upcoming space exploration game, *Adrift*. "Our experience in making first-person shooters made it so in *Adrift* there's always something you're doing with your hands," Orth says. "*Adrift* has game mechanics. It's not just walking around and reading things or listening to things."

Orth feels so confident in the subgenre's future that he's built his whole studio around it. "Those are the kind of games we're going to be making," Orth says. "We're making these shorter, really beautiful interactive experiences. I think people want these things and they're ready for them."

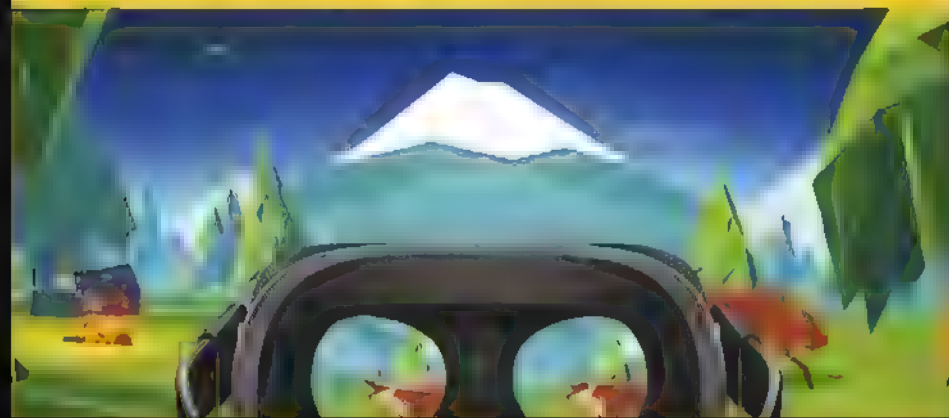
Is VR The Genre's Future?

With many virtual reality headsets set to launch in 2016, developers have started prototyping games on the various platforms. *Three One Zero* is already making *Adrift* to support Oculus Rift and Broken Window Studios' Tristan Parrish Moore confirms the team is now using Rift integration for all its games. "If a game is built properly, it can work in first person on a monitor or on Oculus Rift," Moore says. "It's not that much work to just support both. I think a lot of games are going to be doing that more and more, and we just want to be ahead of the curve on that."

Fullbright co-founder Steve Gaynor isn't so

convinced that VR is a slam dunk for the genre, noting that the games that work best so far seem to be the ones that don't require a lot of movement. "I think when you try to shoehorn a pre-existing genre on to something that wasn't built for it, you can get awkward results," he says. "If I'm totally wrong and we see games like *Gone Home* and *Amnesia* work fantastic with the hardware, I would certainly change my tune."

Time will tell just how well VR works with these games, but it's certainly an interesting prospect. Worlds are already great for immersion, but imagine if you could actually be transported inside one.



PREPPING FOR THE FUTURE

As with any genre, anticipating the future is essential for developers, and for all the successes of first-person exploration games, they've also come with their share of criticism. Every developer I talked to discussed battling against the unfortunate "walking simulator" label. Another criticism is characterizing these experiences as games, since they challenge so much what people have come to expect. Giant Sparrow Games creative director Ian Dallas is hoping he can combat these misconceptions with *What Remains of Edith Finch*.

"For us the challenge going forward [is] how do we get people that may have written it off interested, because

there's a perceived walking simulator genre," he says. "I think that's something that our game is so far away from, so I'm not too worried about it."

Pinchbeck has already noticed a big change as more developers take the wheel. "This new wave that's coming out is really interesting to me because it's changing now," he says. "It's not just walking simulators, it's much more diverse games getting attached around that core idea. It feels like what started as an experiment is now establishing itself and it's not just limited to walking down a corridor while audio logs are playing."

This subgenre is just getting started. Early innovators proved that there's an audience for this type of experience. Every day more developers are experimenting and seeing what else they can do with it.

"I feel like as we go along in this medium, we're just making new kinds of experiences that people can get excited about," Gaynor says. "We found a new way to make nonviolent games that are more about discovering story than any other kind of mechanic, and that's something that I think a lot of people are getting excited about. It's great to see more perspectives on what that type of experience can be."

The Unfinished Swan



FIRST-PERSON EXPLORATION GAMES ON THE HORIZON

With games like Gone Home thriving, more developers are offering up unique exploration experiences. Find out what's in store and what's for you to piece together.



Adrift

PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC
Three One Zero September 505 Games

You begin *Adrift* floating in the wreckage of a destroyed space station. You're all alone, looking for any sign of life, while you desperately search for your next oxygen supply. Cut it too close and you start to gasp for breath, adding tension and urgency to the experience. It might be a science-fiction setting, but your journey is finding out about normal people. "We're not spoon-feeding you the narrative; you have to go off and find it," says Three One Zero's Adam Orth. "When you find it, it's both beautiful and tragic."



Firewatch

PlayStation 4, PC
TBA Panic Campo Santo

Firewatch takes you to the Wyoming wilderness to gain some perspective. You play as Henry, whose life is in a downward spiral. Dealing with marital problems and a DUI, he becomes a fire lookout to get away. Henry's only lifeline is his supervisor Delia, whom he communicates with over radio. The life of a fire lookout has Henry busting drunk kids, keeping an eye out for suspicious figures, and making sure nothing is out of sorts. The comical banter keeps things fun, but soon Henry finds that someone has broken into his tower, leaving him to question if he's really as safe.



Everybody's Gone to the Rapture

PlayStation 4
The Chinese Room, SCE Santa Monica Studio August 11 Sony Computer Entertainment

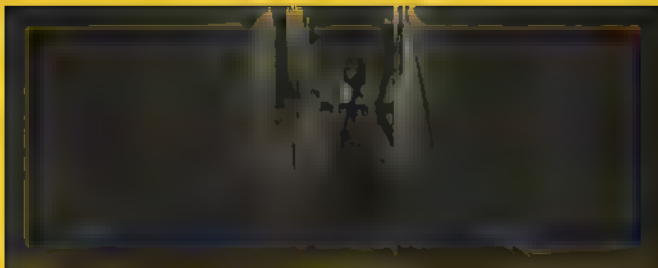
The Chinese Room's latest game takes place during the end of the world. The narrative revolves around six characters in a small English county. As you explore the quaint town, you find connections to these people through items and landmarks, learning more about them. The world isn't like the desolate post-apocalyptic worlds we usually see. "It felt like it was an interesting thing to say, 'What if it's really lush and green and beautiful? The world has ended, but what if it's actually the most beautiful you've ever seen it?'" asks creative director Dan Pinchbeck.



Return of the Obra Dinn

PC
Lucas Pope Lucas Pope TBA

After working on the indie hit *Papers, Please*, Lucas Pope's next project tackles exploration of a merchant ship. Pope says this isn't like his past games, he wants to focus more on story this time around. In 1802, the *Obra Dinn* had over 200 tons of trade goods when it set sail from London to the Orient, but it never made it to its destination. The ship was lost at sea, but surfaced six years later when it drifted into a port with damaged sails and no crew. You play as an insurance adjuster and must board the ship, find the captain's logbook, and figure out what you can for assessment. Soon you find little clues that lead to the crew members and what happened to them.



Allison Road

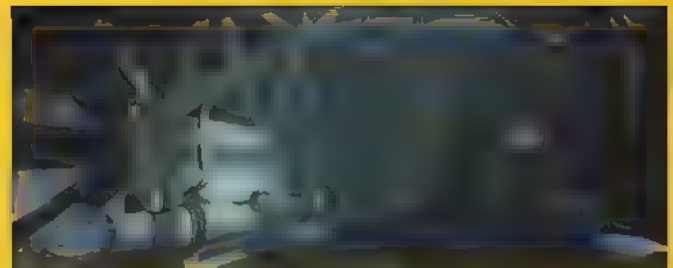
PC

Lilith Ltd.

Lilith Ltd.

2016

Considered a spiritual successor to Konami's canceled PT/Silent Hills project, Allison Road takes place in a familiar setting: a house. You wake up with no memory of how you got there and must investigate letters and photos throughout the house. So far we've only seen one trailer, but at the end a figure that resembles Lisa from PT surfaces, attacking you. The setting and search mechanics may remind you of Gone Home, but we think this game has more horrifying revelations.



Narcosis

PC

Winter

Honor Code, Inc.

Honor Code, Inc.

This first-person horror game puts you in the cold abyss. As an industrial diver, an accident leaves you stranded on the floor of the Pacific Ocean with only a small light and some tools. Oxygen is limited, so you need to conserve your supply as you search for a way to restore it. If you take any damage, you lose air. Lose too much and you hallucinate. Narcosis is all about survival and trying not to lose your mind in the cold loneliness of the sea.



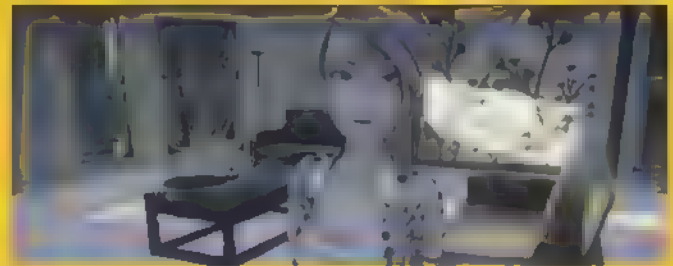
Tacoma

Xbox One, PC
2016

Fullbright

Fullbright

Gone Home developers Fullbright tackle a new, unfamiliar setting with Tacoma. Tacoma is a space station that acts as a waypoint for those traveling from the Earth to the Moon. You play as Amy Ferrier, who arrives for her day at work only to find no one in sight. You must figure out what's happened to the crew, learning about their lives in the process while getting a stat on computer to cooperate with you. Your journey also includes switching perspective by walking on multiple surfaces to find hidden items and passages.

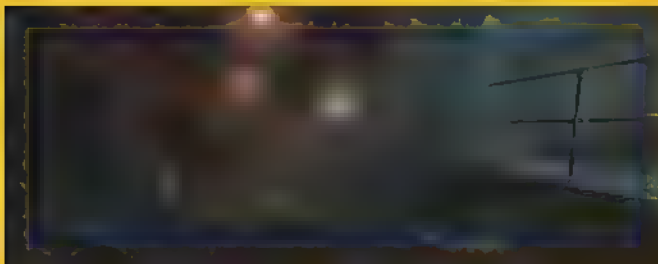


Reflections

PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC
Broken Window Studios

Broken Window Studios
Available in Steam Early Access,
TBD (Consoles)

What do the little decisions we make in life say about us? This question is explored by giving you free rein to do what you want the day before college. You can mingle with people you've come to cherish, pack, or lounge around the house. At the end of the game, your personality type is assessed. Your choices can lead you down the path of being an office executive, going out in the wilderness, living with your family, and more.

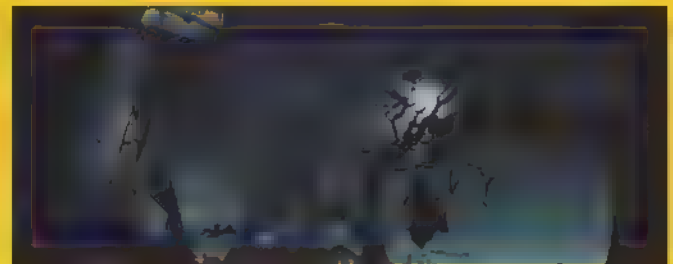


Soma

PlayStation 4, PC
Frictional Games

Frictional Games
September 22

Frictional Games laid a lot of the groundwork for first-person exploration games with Penumbra and Amnesia. Its new project continues to shape the genre. Soma exists in an unknown time period, where machines are developing human traits. You play as Simon, who ends up at a remote research facility where things are not what they seem. Even Simon isn't sure how he got there or why he was selected for whatever is ahead. Your only option is to explore and find out. During the trip, you find audio logs that chronicle the final moments of people's lives. For more on Soma, check out our in-depth preview on pg. 72.



What Remains of Edith Finch

PlayStation 4
2016

Giant Sparrow

Giant Sparrow

The creators of The Unfinished Swan are making things much more eerie in What Remains of Edith Finch. You play as Edith, the only remaining member of a cursed family, and must investigate how each member died in hopes of finding answers for what your future may hold. During your search, you encounter different stories of Edith's ancestors ranging from the early 1900s to present day. These play out in vignettes as you explore objects and rooms that represent Edith's relatives. The game was inspired by *The Twilight Zone*, so expect plenty of twists and unusual occurrences.



Madden NFL 16

Madden's own version of the run and shoot

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Sports
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Tiburon

» **Release Date**
August 25

Madden NFL 16 is making changes across the board, from tweaks to the running game and new ways to catch the ball, to additions to your connected franchise such as a new scouting system. At E3 I got my hands on the game to check out the action on the field. I could tell many instances where the new additions added to the experience, and a few situations I hope are further refined before release.

It's Anyone's Ball

In the past I've criticized Madden's receivers for being too passive when the ball is in the air. They would simply wait for the catch, sometimes allowing defensive backs to make a play on the ball for an interception. This year's receivers are more dynamic because they have different catches they can attempt at your command — possession, aggressive, and run-after-the-catch (RAC).

Each of these has a face button associated to it, and if you play with the new optional tutorial HUD on, you actually see the recommended catch and its face button on the

screen at the right time. Possession prioritizes making the catch above all else, like when a receiver catches the ball and instantly shields it with his body and dives to the ground. This can be useful when you catch the ball at the sticks and just want to secure the first down instead of risking a few extra yards and fumbling or getting blown up. Aggressive, on the other hand, tells the receiver to go up and get the ball at its highest point, useful for jump balls. Finally, RAC tells the receiver to immediately turn up field to try and gain extra yards.

In my experience, the new catches were a mixed bag. I saw some realistic moments where we tried a RAC on a quick slant and our receiver dropped the easy catch — perhaps his eye was already looking up field before securing the ball. Other times, I tried to tell our receiver to perform an aggressive catch on a curl route, but it didn't seem any different than last year.

If you don't select a particular catch, the computer makes one for you. While I like that players have the option to use a specific catch

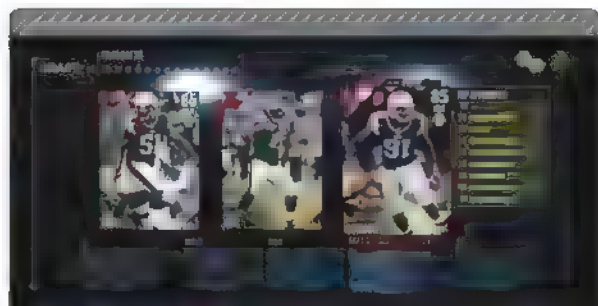
or not, I worry that the computer won't be situationally aware enough to make the smart decision. I've seen players trying to make the wrong kinds of catches for the circumstance already.

These new catches prompt different reactions from defensive players, such as new animations for contested balls, and defenders can cue their own reactions to a pass by choosing to either play the ball or the receiver. These aren't new to this year, but EA promises that when used in conjunction with receiver's new actions, the interaction between the pair should produce all kinds of outcomes.

Plowing Ahead

I haven't had much joy recently with Madden's running game because I feel it can be hard to navigate the running back manually without sticking to my blockers accidentally, but I don't trust the A.I. to take control behind the line and hit the correct hole.

Based on what I've played of the game, I'm slightly optimistic I'll have better luck with running this year.



Draft Champions

EA Tiburon is introducing a new standalone mode this year called Draft Champions. Here you augment your default mediocre team by picking one player from a choice of three through 15 rounds, including a legendary player in the final round. Since the computer chooses which players are presented in each round, you have to make some tough choices. Is it better to take a highly rated TE this round or go with an average left tackle – an arguably more important position?

Once your draft is done (you draft by yourself, and not against other players), you take your team online or against the A.I. in three- or four-game runs for rewards. The quarters are shortened as well, since the aim is for the whole thing to be a quick experience. Get waxed? It's easy to re-draft a new team and get back out on the gridiron.



While not feeling drastically different, there were instances where I worked my way through the line without running up the backs of my blockers. You can “get skinny” by holding down the right bumper to squeeze the back in the hole, and you can make a cut step juke behind the line of scrimmage for those times when a defender gets behind the line of scrimmage and has you dead to rights. It will be interesting to see how powerful this mechanic is, and

which running backs can use it. While nobody likes to get tackled when they're on offense, I was impressed with the new tackling system. Tacklers can influence the ball carrier's body so his motion is appropriately altered. One instance I saw was just like in real life, when a defender hit the ball carrier in the shoulder as he was already being dragged down, knocking the carrier sideways slightly and preventing him from falling forward for an extra yard

I'm glad developer EA Tiburon is trying to address both sides of the ball in the same year. With a little more tuning, hopefully the team can downplay conspicuous catches and make the passing game a dynamic part of the action instead of simply a matter of reading whether your receiver is open or not. Like a team expected to make the playoffs, a few tweaks to the gameplan could take Madden NFL 16 even further.

» Matthew Kato

The Division

Dropping into the Dark Zone



Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

Genre
Online Multiplayer
Shooter

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Massive
Entertainment

Release Date
March 8

Two years have passed since Ubisoft announced its dystopian, third-person online multiplayer shooter at E3. After all this time, gamers still aren't exactly sure what to make of it. Is the Division a post-apocalyptic Destiny? Is it a co-op The Last of Us? We recently got to play it for the first time to find out.

While nearly all of The Division is cooperative, the newly revealed Dark Zone blends in PvP elements as well. It's designed for endgame play, hosting some of the best loot in the game.

"The Dark Zone is where the military tried to contain the pandemic but it didn't work out," says associate creative director Julian Gerighty. "They had to abandon it. They built a huge gate around it, and all of the equipment is still in there. So that's particularly motivating not only for you as an agent to get that equipment, to be able to use it outside of the Dark Zone, but it's also very attractive to the enemy factions."

All of the loot in this mode is contaminated, so even if you pick it up from fallen A.I. enemies or chests, you don't score it permanently for use in any mode until you bring it to an extraction point for a helicopter to whisk away.

The Division has no pre-set classes, but Ubisoft made three different archetypes for demo purposes. I played a character equipped with a shotgun, light machine gun, and pistol. His specials include a pulse that highlights surrounding enemies, and a turret that can be placed on the ground or thrown to a more useful spot. My teammate had an SMG, DMR, and pistol with sticky bomb and seeker mine specials. The third co-op character came equipped with a similar mix of guns and healing capabilities.

This demo pits three teams of three against each other and A.I. enemies. We find a few enemies, take cover, and eliminate them one by one. Once it's over, we pick over loot from fallen

bodies and chests. Our character models now carry yellow packs, indicating to all that we have loot worth stealing.

Once we're loaded up, we run to the extraction point. We summon the chopper and try to hold the landing zone. Other teams quickly swarm, but we're not necessarily enemies yet. All teams are neutral toward each other with gray nametags until somebody fires the first shot. Once this happens, a team is considered rogue and their nametags turn red with a skull on top. If you kill these rogue teams, you'll get more of a reward for taking down the bad guys.

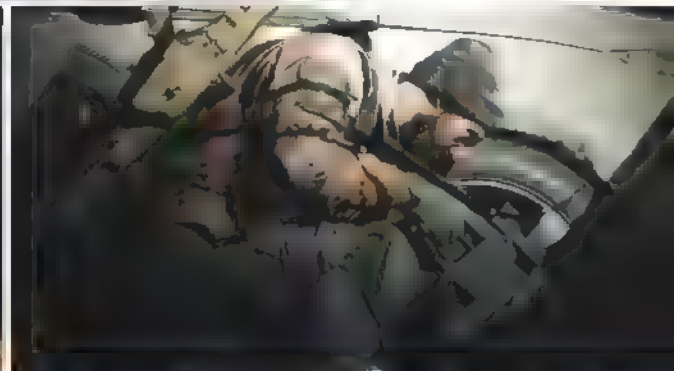
In some ways, this apes popular online survival-horror hit DayZ. You don't know who to trust and for how long. Even people on your own team can stab you in the back. The penalty for death is far lighter as you only lose the special gear you were carrying rather than absolutely everything. Still, for shooter players not accustomed to this survival style of play, it may



So many delicious to get sniped from



What superman had a coming



Trailers Vs. Reality

If you watch the Dark Zone demo trailer, it seems like *The Division* is super serious and dark. Grim music plays, cinematic camera angles highlight the action, and actors simulate voice chat to amp up the intensity. When you're actually in the game, no one strides slowly and purposefully through the maps (especially not when loot appears), quiet, reflective moments are few and far between, and everyone just unloads on each other most of the time. Granted, we were all playing for the first time, so there could be more nuances in the alliances and strategy, but in the real multiplayer world, most players aren't known for subtlety

be extra frustrating to miss out on that armor you were hauling around the map.

We all teamed up on A.I. enemies like an extra tough flamethrower squad, but it's not feasible to stay nice. The whole point is to bring back awesome gear, and you can't do that if another team is currently extracting.

At this point we all start blasting each other and stealing loot. Movement is relatively responsive for a third-person shooter. The run is extra fast and rolls get you out of the way of gunfire. Cover is plentiful and easy to snap to with the press of a button.

Gun handling is loose at this point, and I had to empty a lot of ammo into foes to bring them down—an anomaly for a Tom Clancy game, which normally skews toward realism. A shotgun isn't the best primary for an open landing zone, but in the final game you can choose whatever weapon you want. Even if I got the jump on players, a single headshot wasn't always enough to kill. The light machine gun

covers more distance, but the extreme recoil makes it tough to stay on target. Plenty of time exists for the team to polish things up, and the RPG-style upgrades could help improve accuracy and damage as well.

It's tough to extrapolate how much depth Dark Zone has in the long run. In our quick 15 minutes it seemed pretty simple and straightforward. The final game supports teams of up to four players and more simultaneous onscreen teams than we saw today.

The Division is all based around one giant, seamless recreation of New York, so if you can freely roam the map looking for an extraction point that's not slammed it could stand out from a standard, contained zone control competitive multiplayer mode.

Hopefully, future showings of the game will make this and other gameplay systems of *The Division* clearer. The upcoming beta (which premieres first on Xbox One this December) should go a long way toward that goal. —Bryan Vore



Mirror's Edge Catalyst

Putting Faith into free-running

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Developer**
Electronic Arts

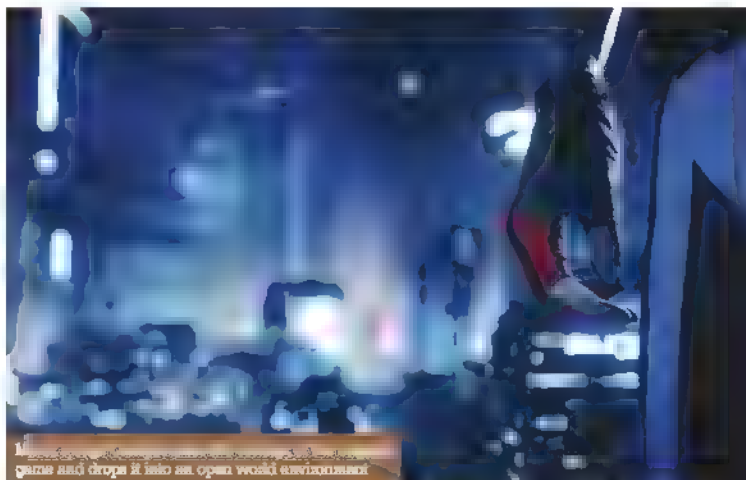
» **Developer**
DICE

» **Release Date**
February 23

In the seven years that have passed since the release of the inventive first-person platformer *Mirror's Edge*, the game has developed a steadfast cult following. The *Run Lola Run*-inspired project continued to gain followers thanks to its sleek style, alluring main character, and unique gameplay that placed more of an emphasis on quick-thinking navigation than combat. For the sequel, DICE is preserving the qualities that built the series' reputation while expanding the experience into an open-world environment.

Taking place years before the original, *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* tells the coming-of-age story of Faith's rise from a young courier to a catalyst for change in the futuristic city of Glass. Seemingly a peaceful utopia on the outside, Glass is actually the home to an oppressive regime that stymies personal freedom in the name of public order. The worst part? Most civilians are too absorbed in their product consumption and mindless television to notice.

The central villain responsible for this current state of the city is Gabriel Kruger, the CEO of the KrugerSec force that polices the city for the conglomerates calling the shots. In the shadow of this totalitarian regime, two rival factions have arisen. First is the runners, a group of rogue couriers that Kruger turns a blind eye to because he occasionally uses them to his own end. Second is a terrorist



outfit called Black November that stands in firm opposition to Kruger. Faith is drawn into the political turmoil of the police state when she learns a dark secret that challenges her convictions.

Our demo picks up early in the story as Faith is released from a detention center. After being fitted for a bracelet that tracks her movement, she is quickly whisked out a side door by a fellow runner named Icarus, who tells her someone named Noah sent him to fetch her. Icarus gives her a contact lens that allows her to see the running paths outlined in red.

After cutting her bracelet we hit the city rooftops and get acquainted with

the new running mechanic. *Mirror's Edge Catalyst*'s revamped parkour system is centered around two buttons on the controller. Players must tap the left bumper to perform vertical navigation like jumping, climbing, and wall running. The left trigger is used to perform tumbling moves when landing on another platform and sliding under low-hanging obstacles. The system requires the player to precisely time button presses to gain momentum, so there's a definite element of skill. The faster you're going, the farther you can jump and quicker you can climb. That said, the second-to-second navigation feels less fluid than other parkour-movement systems developed in the



Combat and navigation are all about preserving your parkour momentum.

wake of *Mirror's Edge* like *Assassin's Creed* and *Titanfall*. This could be intentional, however, to add more difficulty into executing impressive runs during time trials.

Once we familiarized ourselves with the movement, we were put into another section of the game that gave us a taste of the open-world activities. *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* preserves the bold-colored callouts that indicate ideal traversal options, but since the world is no longer linear you're free to move where you wish whenever you want. The demo featured three different activities commonly found in most open-world games: a navigation puzzle that requires Faith to scale

and commandeer a digital billboard, a time-trial race, and a package delivery that served as an introduction to the combat system.

Mirror's Edge Catalyst is all about preserving your momentum, and this philosophy extends to enemy encounters as well. If you're moving at a decent clip you are essentially untouchable to the KrugerSec antagonists, giving you the opportunity to get a jump on your opponents. If you time your attacks well you can kick and punch your way through the opposition quickly. DICE says *Catalyst* features multiple enemy types that will require the player to adopt different approaches, so not

all encounters will be so easy. Martial arts are essentially your only form of defense since Faith has sworn off guns for this outing.

Coming out of the brief demo, we have more questions than answers about *Mirror's Edge Catalyst*. The glistening cityscape is gorgeous, but will the open world feel as barren as this early look at the game? Will there be enough mission variety to keep the game fresh? Can DICE, which has historically struggled with single-player, put together a compelling campaign? We expect EA to shed some light on these questions as we move closer to the February 23 release date. — Matt Bertz



The Banner Saga 2

A beautiful end to the world

Platform
PC
Style
1-Player Strategy
Genre
Versus Evil
Developer
Stoic
Release Date
Winter

An ancient race of stone-clad golems known as The Dredge plague the southern countryside, leaving a bloody path through abandoned farmlands and half-starved bands of resistance. However, the Dredge are not the biggest threat to humanity. A far greater evil looms large behind this army. The earth rattles as this primeval force moves across the land. The world is ending; its inhabitants are just trying to survive.

Stoic's original Banner Saga set up a trilogy of strategy titles that explore the state of a Norse fantasy world after all its gods have died. The company's sophomore release continues this tragic tale while improving on its compelling strategy framework.

Like the original, The Banner Saga 2 propels players into a series of hard discussions, asking users to manage the safety and welfare of a caravan as it marches across the country looking for a safe place. Keeping everyone happy proves impossible, which leads to conflicts that result in bloody battlefields. Many players lost more than a few of their best warriors through the ordeals of the first game, so The Banner Saga 2 bolsters your army with a few new friendly faces.

"The Ravens are an elite mercenary force led by the fast warrior Berserk, Bolverk Bloodaxe," says Stoic co-founder and art director Arnie Jorgensen. "Bolverk swings wildly in battle and can maim both friend and foe, so give him a wide berth.

Killing an enemy can raise his lust for battle and give him another move. If played well, he can do this over and over. The Ravens come with a cadre of powerful fighters, including Folka, a stout, second-in-command melee fighter who can sacrifice her own armor to leave her opponents fully exposed."

In addition to these new heroes, The Banner Saga 2 introduces a new race called the horseborn. These centaurs live far to the south, part of a self-secluded nation that is ashamed of its past. Male horseborn are great hit-and-run tacticians who can boost their attack depending on how many squares they've traveled beforehand—Stoic's idea of a running head start. Meanwhile, female horseborn are javelin experts who inflict bleed damage and can pin their targets to the ground.

The Banner Saga's turn-based strategy has seen a few other small tweaks. Strength is still tied to a character's health, so as they take damage they slowly grow weary and

their attacks become less effective. However, heroes can now have multiple abilities, which should keep them useful even near the end of a battle.

"Combat scenarios have a more tailored approach," says Stoic co-founder and technical director John Watson. "This means when there are story reasons for doing so, the win and loss conditions for a combat scenario can vary. Cinematically, we've created design-facing tools that allow us to do more storytelling in combat by having more scripted events and exposition. Now, the battlefield conditions can change mid-battle, and some of your heroes will participate in the battle semi-autonomously."

The end of the first Banner Saga left fans with a heartbreaking cliffhanger, so we're excited to continue that story even if we're nervous to test out the capabilities in leading hundreds of people across rivers, over ancient sacred grounds, and through armies of mythological enemies. — Ben Reeves

Is The Sequel Also Coming To Console?

The original Banner Saga released on PC in January of 2014, but a PS4 port is still in the works for release later this year. Stoic wouldn't comment on the possibility of a console release for The Banner Saga 2, but given the studio's interest in console players, we wouldn't be surprised to see the game migrate over sometime after the console release of the first game.





Rising Thunder

A Street Fighter veteran enters the ring with a new take on the genre

Fighting games can be one of the most thrilling tests of pure skill, challenging players to anticipate their opponents' moves and react with lightning speed. Newcomers hoping to tap into that excitement face an intimidating climb from the outset. What other genre asks its players to memorize arcane button combinations to perform the moves that are critical to success? And more to the point, is that kind of barrier necessary?

"It's such an awesome genre, and it's so easy to watch and get into

and at least understand at a base level," says Seth Killian, the game's director, who's perhaps best known for his work as a special combat advisor on the Street Fighter and Marvel Vs. Capcom franchises. The problem is, it can take so long to get good at fighting games – anywhere from three months to a year, by Killian's estimate – that he finds them difficult to recommend. His new game, Rising Thunder, removes one of the biggest hurdles by mapping special moves to ordinary button presses

The online 2D fighting game, now in an alpha build that people can download and play at no charge, is easy to pick up. Players can choose between one of six different hulking robots in its current state and challenge foes online – focusing on when to pull off a missile strike, for example, instead of getting psyched out by the stick-twiddling minutiae of how to do it. Killian says the free-to-play game will continue to evolve from its current state, with new features, characters, and purely optional cosmetics coming along the way. » **Jeff Cork**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Gameplay**
1-Player Fighting
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Radiant Entertainment

» **Developer**
Radiant Entertainment

» **Release**
2015

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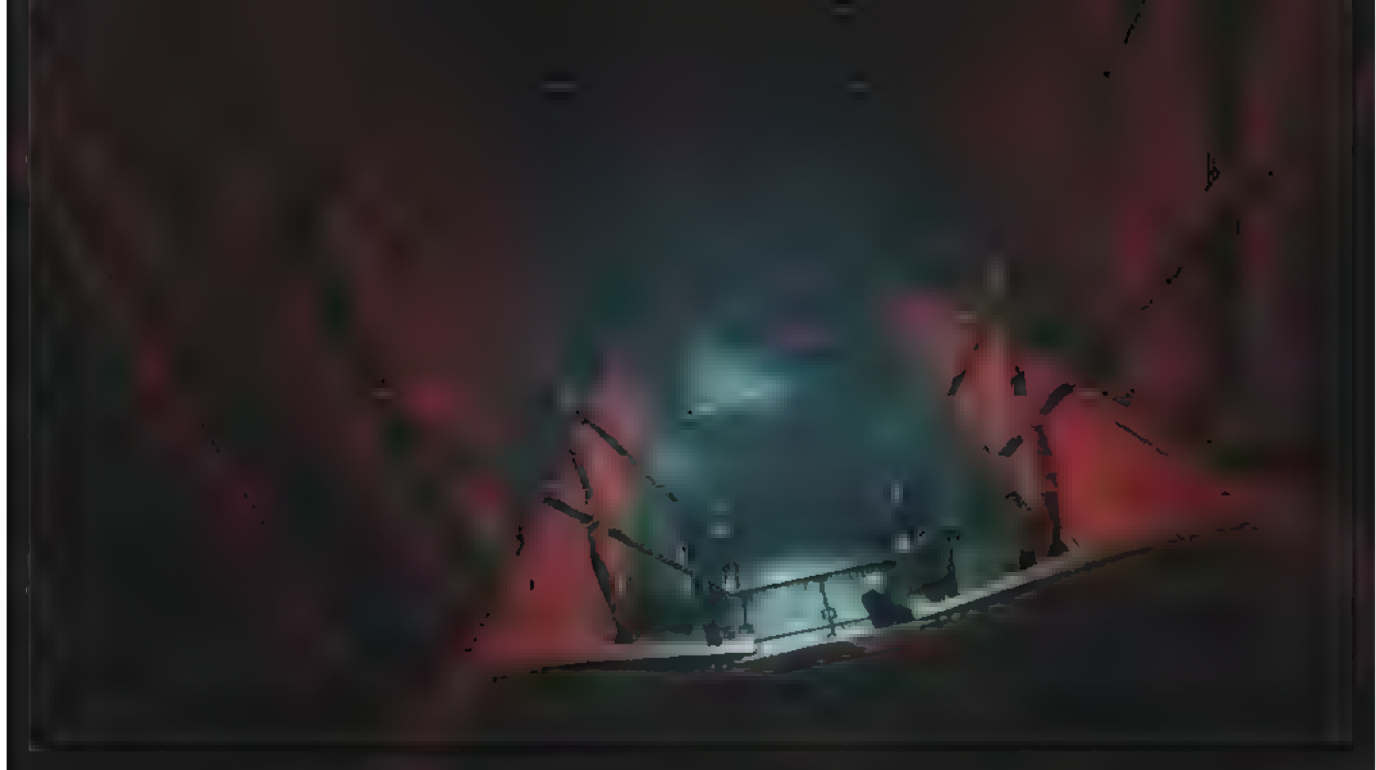
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Student work by: John Rogales & George Stolt



Soma

Medical malpractice and deep-sea terror

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4 • PC
» **Genre**
1-Player Adventure
» **Developer**
Frictional Games
» **Release Date**
September 22

Thus far, developer Frictional Games (*Amnesia: The Dark Descent*) has shown off *Soma*'s treacherous underwater compound, an expanse of narrow corridors crawling with murderous machines. In a recent extensive hands-on preview, we discovered the surprising series of events that lead the protagonist into the dank hellhole.

Soma's tale of underwater research facilities and haywire robots kicks off in an unexpected way—in an apartment in Toronto, Canada. The protagonist, Simon, wakes from a nightmare which hints at previous brain trauma caused by a harrowing car accident. Exploring Simon's modern digs conveys both the character's personality and Frictional's knack for detail. Inspecting his apartment reveals he's no expert underwater researcher; he's just the owner of a bookstore with recurring headaches on his way to a doctor's appointment.

Simon's enigmatic brain injury is the first surprising revelation in the preview. The next is that his doctor doesn't seem on the up and up. The doctor's office's looks tidy enough at a glance, but half of the space is cast in ominous darkness. Flipping a switch reveals the space is only half completed. Carpet and drywall is still missing, and a ceiling panel has fallen. Unshaken, Simon finds the doctor in a backroom, who we discover is actually still working on his



PhD. Simon is part of his neurological thesis project. A moment later we're sitting on a chair, a brain-scan headset lowers onto Simon's head, and the screen goes black.

Derelict machinery and barnacled industrial walls come into focus when the machine lifts from Simon's head. Simon barely has time to figure out what happened between his "doctor" appointment and coming to in the underwater facility. Deadly robots stalk the metallic corridors, forcing players to evade their sweeping sentry lights. Other robots are less lethal, communicating with Simon using unsettlingly human voices. One

machine curses in pain when it's electrocuted, and another begs for a mysterious substance like a junkie on the streets.

Soma unravels an intriguing premise after Simon makes his way to the deep-sea base. Growing aquatic growths cluster around electrical work, sometimes fusing together and blurring the lines between organic matter and machine. Frictional is not only crafting a tense underwater nightmare filled with scary killer robots; it's setting up an enthralling and dramatic story that may test player's preconceptions about what defines humanity. —**Tim Turi**

Mario Tennis: Ultra Smash

Mario goes for the overhead smash

The Mario Tennis series is known for its accessible take on the back-and-forth chess match of a sport. With energetic characters and power-ups inspired by the Super Mario series and its peripheral franchises, the experience has a ways been over-the-top. Ultra Smash takes things to a new level of ridiculousness.

Nintendo is promising familiar faces from past Mario Tennis games, as well as some new ones. With the success of Mario Kart 8's Zelda and Animal Crossing DLC, it will be interesting to see if Nintendo keeps injecting more of its franchises into its popular crossover titles.

Ultra Smash introduces Mega Battles, a mode where the characters collect mega mushroom power-ups to grow to massive sizes. Characters under the influence of a mega mushroom are more powerful and able to cover more of the court thanks to improved reach. The massive sizes on display are thankfully restricted to Mega Battles. Becoming giant feels fun and powerful, but it's disruptive

to the core game.

Even outside of that mode, fans will notice the new jump shot ability in their arsenals. Using jump shots, characters jump high to deliver a strong smash return. When combined with the selection of shots from previous titles, players have more control than ever on how to attack the other side of the court.

Thus far Nintendo has not discussed online play for Ultra Smash.

Mario Tennis Open introduced this feature on 3DS, so it would be a definite step back for the next console version to have no online multiplayer.

Mario Tennis: Ultra Smash aims to deliver the same bombastic approach as previous titles. Joining Super Mario Maker and Star Fox Zero in populating the Wii U's scant holiday offerings, Nintendo hopes Mario Tennis: Ultra Smash will be the title that has the advantage. » Brian Shea

» **Platform**
Wii U

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Sports
(Online TBA)

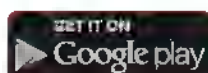
» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Camelot

» **Release Date**
Holiday

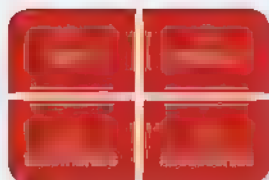


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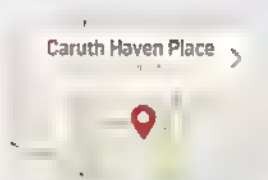
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World Of Warships

Skirmish on the sea with history

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
24-Player
Online Action
- » **Publisher**
Wargaming
- » **Developer**
Wargaming
- » **Release**
2015

Chunks splinter off the hull as a result of a direct hit, fires are threatening to overwhelm your ship, and planes are circling overhead – but you're determined to get that last shot off and take one of the opponent's valuable ships out before you go. No, this isn't a remake of the age-old classic Battleships, but expect plenty of shooting and sinking.

Welcome to Wargaming's team-based naval offering, World of Warships, where the player picks

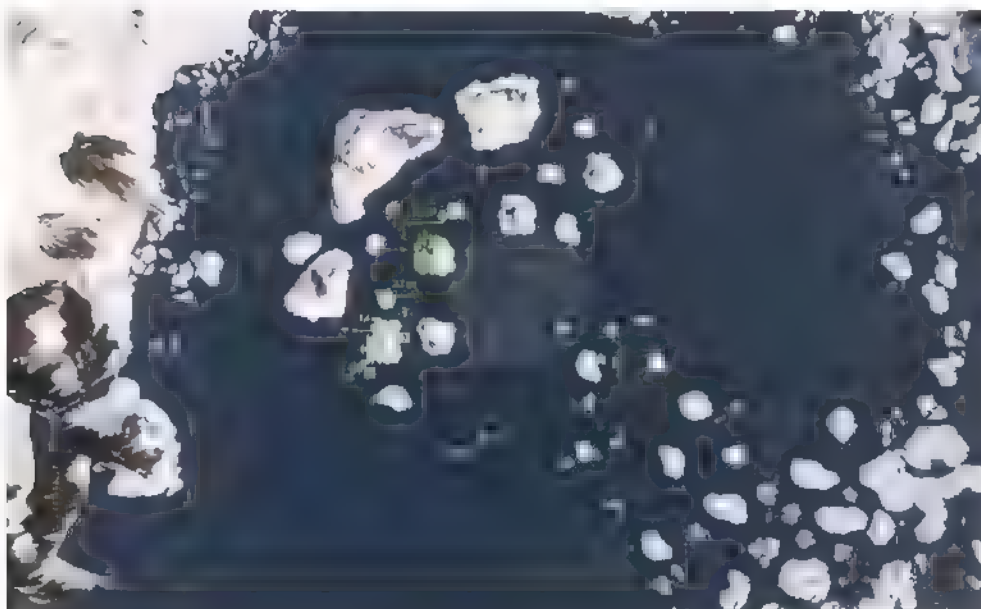
from a plentiful assortment of ships before heading out into instant action matchmaking. Many different ship tiers and loadouts from the mid-20th century are available, ranging from historically accurate vessels to those brought to life from prototype documents (sorry, no submarines). Each ship falls into one of four basic categories.

Destroyers are fast and rather fragile, but boast an incredible payload of destruction (including torpedoes) that can tear apart other ships in a hurry.

Cruisers are the versatile "balanced" option, with a wide assortment of loadouts that are excellent at applying continued assault with a heavy rate of fire and anti-aircraft/torpedo options. Battleships are the slow "tanks" of the World of Warships universe that you want out in front to attract opposing guns. They also pack serious damage potential of their own. The fourth class of ship is perhaps the most interesting – the aircraft carrier. These play much differently than the rest of the ships, and allow the player to command an army of aerial forces with a unique view and control – similar to playing a tactical role in a real-time strategy game.

When I first started playing in early alpha, the combat's sluggish pace failed to enthrall me. But as the game has gotten closer to launch, the pacing has hit a sweet spot. Battles feel fast (well, as fast as things can get when dealing with big ships on the sea), with enough team-based tactical components to keep skirmishes from devolving into simple slugfests unless that's what you're going for. As with the other Wargaming titles, your demise isn't a great hurdle – you can be back in another match in mere moments.

Though other features like dynamic weather and night battles are still on the horizon, we'll see if the release version World of Warships is seaworthy later this year. » **Daniel Tack**



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Devilian

Mixing massive genres

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Worlds**
Trion Worlds

» **Developer**
Bluehole
Ginno Games

2015

What are you playing today – will it be a click-frenzied lootfest, hunting for legendary loot on procedurally generated map after map? Or maybe a different game where you team up with friends to take on big bosses and dungeons? What if you could do both? Trion Worlds' *Devilian* blends isometric hack-and-slash of games like *Diablo* with MMO-based social features like guilds and dungeon crawls in hopes of making two of the most popular PC genres resonate with a new audience.

This Korean-developed game features traditional class options – melee berserkers, magical evokers, bombastic cannoneers, and stealthy shadow hunters. These classes all have three different skill trees that players can delve into, allowing for significant variation in gameplay. Outside of all the core skills and abilities you'd expect from these archetypal frames, each class can call upon a Devil Form, an ultimate skill that can turn the tide of battle. Devil forms have their own equipment, levels, and skills, so it's not just a one-shot cooldown skill to punch in the right situation; it's a whole new way to play.

Unlike a standard ARPG, core MMORPG elements are injected into



Devilian that turn it into something else altogether – 20 vs. 20 competitive battles, a marketplace for the buying and selling of goods, dungeons designed for groups of players to delve into (yes, there is a dungeon finder tool for “instant action”), and a guild system that confers benefits and allows players to participate in special raids.

In today's world of instanced ARPGs you probably won't run into other players unless you're grouped with them. That's not the case here. With *Devilian*'s open-world system you'll probably run into quite a few

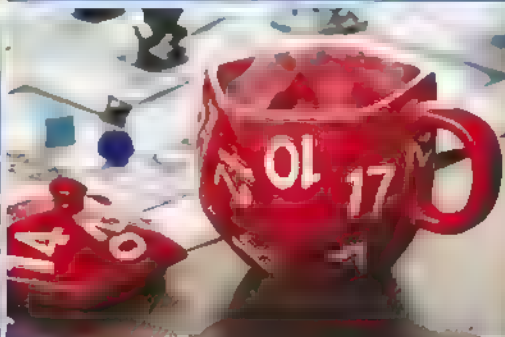
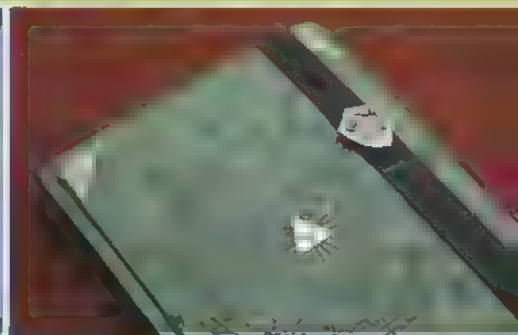
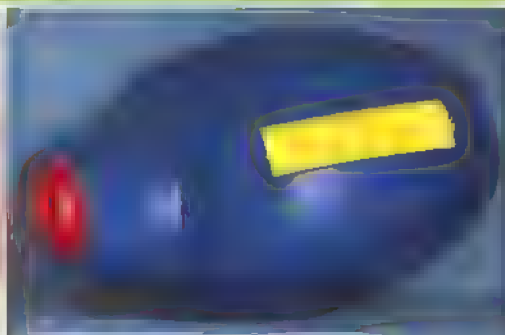
other players as you move from zone to zone, and maybe even choose to take on some open-world bosses along the way.

Devilian features an alternate advancement system so that even capped players will continue to have a way to develop outside of the standard loot treadmill. Combining this with the guild focus and big bosses should be an interesting mix, perhaps avoiding the repetitive feeling that can sink in at the endgame of ARPGs. This all sounds great on paper, but we'll see if it's a winning formula in practice later this year. » **Daniel Tack**



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World Of Final Fantasy

Making Final Fantasy more accessible and adorable than ever before



PlayStation 4 • Vita

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Platform**

Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release Date**

2016

During Square Enix's press conference at this year's E3, many thought the new Kingdom Hearts III trailer was debuting with the words, "Do you remember it all? The terrible past you caused?" Fans were shocked to see immediately afterward some cute "chibi" characters that we'd never seen before, followed by similar versions of Black Mages, Moogles, and even Fina.

Fantasy VII's Cloud. This adorable world turned out to be a brand new PlayStation 4 and Vita game: World of Final Fantasy.

World of Final Fantasy features a unique battle system where your party of six characters – two teenaged main characters, Reynn and Lann, alongside four monsters – can stand atop one another, forming a tower. All of the characters share a single HP and ability pool when stacked, but if all of your characters know a particular ability, the amalgamated unit can cast a more powerful version. Veterans should be familiar with the core battle system, which is modeled after the 16-bit era Active Time battle system seen in earlier Final Fantasy games.

We're curious to see how the tower system will function with the main characters. Should the twins be in chibi mode, they'll hop atop larger monsters from the series. However, in their normal forms, their cuddly allies will jump on top of them. At this time, it's unclear how this changes the battles themselves. The chibi versions of the characters were designed by Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles' Yasuhisa Izumisawa,

while the regular-sized characters were handled by series veteran Tetsuya Nomura.

One of the biggest unanswered questions is how the characters in the trailer, like Cloud and the Warrior of Light, came to the world of Grymoire to fight alongside our teenaged main characters. These classic characters appear to be available as "Savior Summons," not to be confused with the game's "Mega M Rage Summons," which only include traditional summon spells. While we're still unsure if Cloud and company can join our party, we know that some characters from spin-off series will appear in Grymoire.

While we don't have many details about World of Final Fantasy yet, it's intriguing to see Square Enix take a slightly less serious bent with the series after recent games like Final Fantasy Type-0 and the hyper-dramatic Final Fantasy XIII trilogy. Square is hoping World of Final Fantasy can introduce a younger generation to the franchise. Time will tell the result, but it looks like Square is cramming all the cuteness it can into it. » Kimberley Wallace





Pro Evolution Soccer 2016

The franchise is finally emerging from the tunnel

After refining its craft on the PlayStation 2, the PES series has been in the wilderness the past few years – including a transition to the new systems that more or less happened a year early and hampered the last game on the PS3. Done with dithering, last year the series found a way forward, stabilizing and refining its control scheme and feature set, making PES 2016 the first entry in a while that can propel the series upward.

The game boasts many new animations that are noticeable all over the pitch. PES 2016 is a more physical title thanks to its new collision system, but at the same time, it doesn't feel like outcomes are predetermined or that you can't retain possession. Developer PES Productions has prided itself on its feints system of dekes (which are still there), but being smart enough to anticipate trouble and deftly dribble aside has a place amidst physical challenges. Expect to see new animations appear in contesting headers as well, where

players truly jostle for position instead of statically waiting for the ball to descend.

Soccer is a team game, so thankfully your teammates on the pitch do their part with some smartly timed runs and a new automatic give-and-go system. The PES series has been knocked for the complexity of its controls, and while some of that still remains, it's nice that the A.I. is smart enough to recognize when it's advantageous to pass the ball and move into space for the return.

This gameplay backbone is augmented by the further development of the Master League and myClub modes. Both are receiving a visual overhaul to take them from serviceable menus to downright appealing (including the return of cutscenes for the Master League). The Master League career mode also has a new transfer system, among other additions. MyClub – the build-a-team online mode – gets stronger in its second year with a player leveling system based on your performance

on the pitch as well as the sacrificing of surplus players to improve the rest of the squad.

Even with its newfound confidence, plenty of questions still surround the franchise. Can myClub be a standout mode? Will the Master League give players the full flavor of being a manager? Have keepers improved? Can the gameplay controls be fluid, responsive, and realistic? These questions are significant, but PES Productions finally looks to be taking its challenges head on.

» **Matthew Kato**

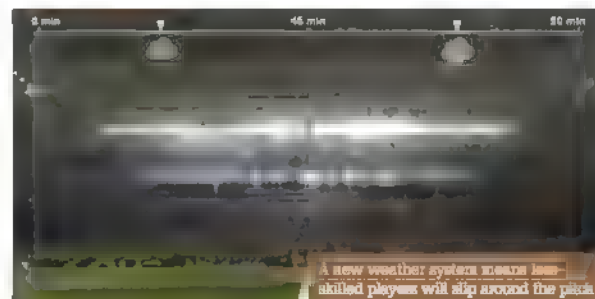
Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(Online TBA)

Publisher
Konami

Developer
PES Productions

Release
September 15





Doom

Fun and fast-as-hell multiplayer

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Play**
1-Player Shooter
(12-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Bethesda

» **Developer**
id Software

» **Release**
Spring

I got my hands on Doom's multiplayer at this year's QuakeCon and walked away mighty impressed by its speed, weapon feel, map design, and massive amounts of carnage that can unfold at any given second. Id Software's first showing of competitive play is exactly what I wanted it to be: fast-paced, retro, and a meat grinder of immediate action.

I played two 6v6 deathmatch rounds, both on the same map, which is inspired by the lava-based single-player stage that was shown last year at QuakeCon and again at this year's E3. The map is small, but offers plenty of paths and vertical areas. Almost every vector is an opening, and the

sight lines are short, meaning an enemy could be on you at any given moment. You never feel safe.

I played on a team with five seasoned PC FPS players, who barked out orders and screamed at me when I foolishly jumped in the lava and died. They were also quick to point out when the coveted demon token dropped. If a player grabs this token, they transform into a Revenant—a large, skeletal beast with two rocket launchers strapped to its back. The Revenant is an overpowered killing machine, and the opposing team must do everything in their power to down this threat as quickly as possible. One blast from the Revenant's rockets murders a player

Given my poor aim while controlling this titan, I'm guessing the splash damage is also fairly lethal, as I still racked up two or three kills with it.

The standard class loadouts pack a punch, too. Either prior to starting a match or after every death, the player can pick from the assault, sniper, or ambusher classes. Two custom loadout options are also available. The assault class consists of a rocket launcher, plasma rifle, and frag grenade. The sniper has a vortex rifle, super shotgun, and personal teleporter (an item I sadly did not put to the test). The ambusher tows a static cannon (a multiplayer-only weapon), repeater, and frag grenade. All three classes



An early look at one of the multiplayer maps set in Hell

are fun to play, but I gravitated toward the assault class because the rocket launcher is a beast. Not only does it turn bodies into unrecognizable smears on direct impact, it features manual detonation, meaning if you miss your target you can quickly detonate the errant shot to still inflict damage or even kill them.

This Doom reboot has no cover or sprint mechanics. Your character bolts out of the gate and never slows or accelerates beyond that speed. The fast pace demands twitch reflexes and skillful evasion. Many of my confrontations involved ducking in and out of corridors and double jumping. After every skirmish, I would be on the lookout for health packs and armor.

Although I didn't perform a melee kill myself, I saw one of my teammates get up close and personal with an opponent and brutally take him down. Most of the people playing the game—presumably for the first time like me—didn't engage in too many face-to-face fights. Most of the deaths came from firearms or the Revenant.

I had a blast with my first taste of Doom's multiplayer, which id Software executive producer Marty Stratton says has a nice progression system. "We're doing it in a way that I think works really well for an arena shooter," he says. "You really do expect and want to be able to go into Doom for the first time and not expect to be handicapped in a progression way. When you buy it and sit down and play it, we hope you have a great experience, and then those carrots out there will be juicy enough that you want to keep going. Just from a gameplay perspective, I think we've hit on something that is fun and addictive outside of progression."

You won't have to wait long to get your hands on the Doom multiplayer alpha. Stratton says that a random group of players who purchased Wolfenstein: The New Order and registered for the Doom beta will get access to the alpha in the near future. The beta will come closer to the game's launch next spring. —Andrew Reiner



The arena-style combat requires players to keep moving and think on their feet





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GAME OF THE MONTH
85 Rocket League

Payonix delivered one of this month's biggest surprises with Rocket League. We were blown away with how well the studio delivered a simple concept – soccer, with RC cars. The game's precise controls and top-notch presentation make it a multiplayer sensation and a dark-horse victor for game of the month.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just any of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Mixed. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Malcol Price Rb

AWARDS

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Rory McIlroy PGA Tour

Rory has a few clubs missing from his bag

7

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online) Publisher EA Sports Developer EA Tiburon Release July 14 Rating E

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept

A back-to-basics feature set for this first entry on the new systems

» Graphics

Overall the game looks decent, but not noteworthy. The framerate stutters in the pre- and post-gameplay scenes in particular

» Sound

The announcers are good, giving info on the course, talking amongst themselves, and sounding interested in what's going on

» Playability

Fans of the old Tiger series will find the gameplay familiar, although I had a little trouble with the putting

» Difficulty

Rory has solid gameplay and covers the basic feature bases, but it doesn't distinguish itself

» Replay Value

Moderate

EA Sports' franchises haven't always had easy transitions to new systems. Rory's debut isn't as bare as NHL 15, nor as unplayable as Madden NFL 06 was last generation, but its charms are limited. It does some things well, but they aren't enough to make it stand out.

The freedom to mix and match gameplay options (like your swing type and assists), a gauntlet of nighttime minigame challenges, and an option for shorter career tournament rounds are nice, but they don't distract you from what's missing. Online play lacks country clubs, simultaneous multiplayer tournaments (only head-to-head play), and the create-a-challenge of years past. Plus, part of the career mode's new progression system takes control out of your hands.

You no longer manually add attribute points to specific skills when you level up—the computer ups everything automatically. To be fair, the progression path it chooses doesn't hamper your performance on the course, and you can shape your character with attribute packages that boost specific sets of skills, but I'd rather sculpt my pro myself. Furthermore, your customization options are limited to a handful of pre-set appearance templates that are a shadow of past iterations.

The courses are limited as well. The loss of The Masters/Augusta hurts not only because it's one fewer event for a FedEx Cup schedule that now only has 10 locations (more will be added after launch as free DLC), but the iconic event used to provide added focus that is missing here. At launch four fantasy courses are also included, but notables Parace Storm (the Battlefield map) and Coyote Falls at the Grand Canyon are not part of the tour. Parace Storm is only a visual wrapper and not really interactive, while Coyote Falls makes you navigate its steep drops and rocky cliffs.

The game doesn't bind the already-bare modes together to make everything relevant or engaging. For example, the coin system in the last PGA game connected your career progress with the offline modes, but that's gone. Similarly, the Night Club challenges have no online component, and your online tournament winnings don't connect to any other part of the game. I liked the Night Club challenges, but progression through them is too linear, blocking off access to all the courses.

PGA Tour's offerings may be pared down, but the gameplay and the slight evolution of the series' ball-striking system feel familiar and comfortable. I like this year's

option to customize which gameplay options/assists you want to use (like the ability to apply mid-air spin). My only complaint is that the range of the putting meter is a little short, which makes it easy to overcook the backswing and add more power than intended. I initially had some trouble with the swing power of my wedge shots, but I got used to it.

I also like the quick rounds option, where the computer automatically selects a handful of holes each round. It duplicates holes sometimes from round to round or when returning to the same course, but over a four-round weekend you play plenty of golf and see what the courses have to offer. Your progress between the rounds for the holes you don't play is mimmed by the computer based on your golfer's attributes. My score only fluctuated a stroke up or down, and my place varied mainly because of how other golfers fared.

Rory McIlroy PGA Tour isn't a bad game, it's just one that doesn't positively make the case for long-time fans of the series or the new systems. With the gameplay nudged ahead only slightly, the graphics not particularly new-gen, and a reduced feature set, the mind easily wanders to what we've lost rather than finding comfort in what's there.

» Matthew Kato

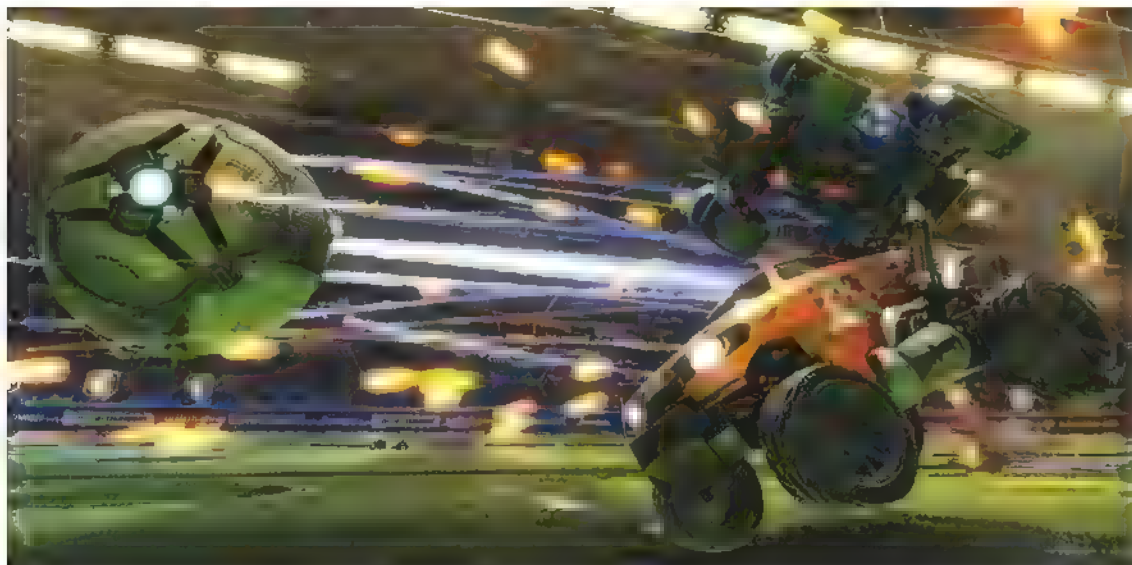
Rocket League

Radio-controlled chaos



Style 1 to 4-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Psyonix
Developer Psyonix **Release** July 7 **Rating** E10+

9



Play a few Rocket League matches and you see more than a few similarities between the game's RC-car action and pre-K level soccer. A mass of players follows the ball, wherever it rolls, teammates steal from each other, and accidental own-goal shots are almost expected. Even after your skill level advances and you're able to make exhilarating mid-air saves and coordinated attacks, your car (and team) looks adorable in post-goal replays. Its game face may be set in a goofy grin instead of an intimidating snarl, but Rocket League's beautifully balanced gameplay is one of the best competitive games I've played in ages.

Psyonix's game is deceptive on nearly every level. I've played car soccer plenty of times over the years, usually in the form of an ill-conceived minigame. These are usually frustrating, since pushing a ball around with a car is an unsurprisingly clunky task. Rocket League is also clunky at first, but the nimble cars make vehicular soccer a breeze once you get over the initial speed bumps. The basics are similar to most third-person arcade racers out there, but you need to spend time learning how to use your car's advanced spins, boosts, and rocket thrusts to get the most of the game. Spend some time in the tutorials — it's worth it.

When you've finally gotten the hang of driving, Rocket League is an absolute joy. The rules are the same whether you're playing 1v1, 2v2, 3v3,

or 4v4 matches: earn the most points in five minutes. You nudge, slam, bonk, or bash the ball into your opponents' goal. The arena boundaries are banked into high walls, so the ball is in play no matter how exuberantly it's been hit, which keeps the action moving. The arenas are sized nicely, too. They're small enough to where you can assist on defense if you see an opponent tearing toward your goal, but they're large enough so players aren't unnecessarily trading paint just driving into position.

Matches are short and players are given a steady drip of cosmetic upgrades for their vehicles by simply participating. None of them affect gameplay, but a variety of hats, paint effects, body types, and smoke-trail designs let players show off their personality during the slow-motion

replays. The in-game action goes by too quickly to appreciate the visual details, from the textures on the arena floors to the flecks of glitter in the paint. It's more beautiful than it needs to be, really.

There is a single-player option in the form of a season mode, though playing against A.I. isn't nearly as satisfying as knowing that you're getting one past (or helping out) another player. The focus here is multiplayer, and if you can't get online or wrangle up some fellow players for local matches, you're missing out on the best experience the game offers.

Once I fully connected with Rocket League's controls, my car felt like an extension of me. It's a sensation that's all too rare in games, which makes it all the more satisfying when something like it comes along. » **Jeff Cork**



» Concept

Take what's usually a frustrating novelty — car soccer — and transform it via excellent controls and a top-notch presentation

» Graphics

The intense action often makes it impossible to appreciate the visual subtleties, but they're there if you pay attention

» Sound

Energetic music and crowd chants make it seem as though you're in an actual stadium event

» Playability

It takes a while to learn every nuance of your car's handling, but the payoff is worth it

» Replay Value

Every game has highlight-reel worthy moments, which is amazing considering the five-minute matches

» Replay Value

High

Magic Duels

An enchanting new direction for digital Magic

8.75

Xbox One • PC • iOS

» Concept

Transform the annual Duels of the Planeswalker series into a continually updated, free-to-play experience

» Graphics

One of the best-looking digital card game tables out there

» Story

Plenty of narrated story brings the campaign to life. In-game sound effects are passable but nothing special

» Playability

This is the best new-player experience available for Magic: The Gathering. New players learn through an intuitive UI and a series of tutorial quests

» Entertainment

All the great things about the Duels series with a new format that lets players keep their collections and build on them. Great options for both solo battlers that just want to experiment to serious online combatants.

» Replay Value

High



Style 1-Player Strategy [4-Player Online] Publisher Wizards of the Coast
Developer Stainless Games Release July 8 (iOS), July 29 (PC), August (Xbox One), 2015 (PS4) Rating T



The Duels of the Planeswalkers series has seen many annual releases as the years have gone by – fun, single-serving Magic: The Gathering digital games that allow players to experiment with interesting subsets of cards from the classic card game. Over the years we've seen more freedom, more cards, and improvements like getting to select your own land cards and full deck-building options. With Magic Duels, we keep all the best parts of the series, but the annual releases are no more.

Here's the most important change with this iteration of the popular annual franchise: It's a permanent, continually updated client now. Players keep their collections, the format is free-to-play (not a once-a-year purchase), and new card rollouts will eventually sync up with physical releases of new cards and sets. It's a big deal for the franchise and the series, even if things aren't quite exactly as they are on the tabletop. Magic Duels is now the definitive, intuitive way to learn to play Magic: The Gathering, better than any friend willing to teach you or starter deck with a lengthy list of instructions and rules.

The Duels series is embracing its

direction as a new game format for Magic. It follows the same rules as paper Magic, but because of unique rarity restrictions on cards in decks, it creates its own metagame and deck types. While purists may scoff at this unique environment, it offers an interesting new playing field that's cool to dip into for veterans and definitely more friendly to those still learning. Players are given an impressive selection of cards to begin their rise to power and collect gold for winning battles in the campaign, against computer opponents, and online.

Gold is the in-game currency, and an important influx of it is tied to completing daily quests and large-scale community oriented tasks, encouraging players to try new decks or make goofy specialty decks that might fall outside their traditional wheelhouse. Gold is used to purchase packs, and all cards are obtainable for free, assuming you're willing to put the time in. Alternatively, you can shell out some real money for gold to bolster your collection. Each card has a collection cap, so you won't have to worry about acquiring a virtual shoebox of useless extras. The system is similar to other current digital card games, and it's a great addition to this online

Magic: The Gathering title.

Players can currently explore the first available Magic Duels content, Origins, through both cards and a campaign that takes players through the origin stories of five of Magic's most iconic characters. It's a cool way to handle a single-player campaign that has players advance their decks as these legends advance their own lives, leading up to their transition to powerful planeswalkers. The game features campaign, solo-battle, multi-player battle and leaderboards, and 2-Headed Giant play (2v2).

Magic Duels is the best implementation of the Duels of the Planeswalkers series yet, with great deckbuilding options that can put together themed decks in mere moments and cool incentives to experiment outside your comfort zone. If you're a new player looking to learn Magic: The Gathering, Magic Duels is the best place to start. If you're a seasoned veteran, the way the game uses rarity restrictions to create a unique environment makes it an attractive alternative for some duels. » **Daniel Tack**

This review pertains to the PC version of Magic Duels. The game is also available on iOS, Xbox One, and is coming to PS4 later this year.

PlanetSide 2

Live, die, repeat

Style 1-Player Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Daybreak Game Company **Developer** Daybreak Game Company
Release June 23 Rating T

First-person shooter fans have played the role of the sole, galaxy-saving hero countless times before. PlanetSide 2 is not that experience. On these chaotic battlefields, you are not a master chief or legendary guardian who can expect to have an unlosable war served up to you on a silver platter. Instead, you are a grunt among hundreds, and your job is to serve the war effort until you die (usually in a matter of minutes), hopefully taking down a few members of the opposition with you.

PlanetSide 2 drops players into an endless war. Three factions vie for territorial control of four continents, any one of which puts the battle zones of other competitive shooters to shame with its sheer size. Also unlike other shooters, this war is truly endless. Combat is not parceled out in discrete matches, war rages constantly, with no definitive winner and no MVP accolades to aspire to. While that may not sound appealing to those accustomed to being the star of their own persona hero story, it gives PlanetSide 2 a unique feel—that of true large-scale warfare, whose strategy and complexities are slowly revealed over time.

Unfortunately, Daybreak Games does little to help you figure out those complexities. Aside from a few audio cues, it's up to you to figure out the control scheme, complex upgrade mechanics, and how the hell taking over territory actually works. The new "tutorial" continent succeeds in downsizing the scope of the conflict to a comprehensible scale, but you can still expect to spend a few hours in abject confusion as you get a feel for the game.

However, the investment is worth it. Despite being a free-to-play game, PlanetSide 2 is not only fun, it's



fair. Players earn access to every class, vehicle, and upgrade as they level up, and all weapons and items can be purchased with certification points earned alongside your XP. Only cosmetic items and XP boosts are locked exclusively behind the pay wall. I never felt like I was being penalized for not shelling out money.

While the base rate of gaining certs is slow, PlanetSide 2 plies you with constant bonuses that boost your acquisition to satisfying levels. The only downside is that Daybreak has inexplicably omitted the PC version's VR training facility, which lets you try out new equipment before you buy it. This exclusion is a huge detriment; new weapons and attachments are considered sidegrades, not upgrades, so your weapons of choice come down to preferences that can't be surmised from the stats screen. Dropping a day's worth of certs on a gun only to instantly realize you don't like how it handles is a huge buzzkill and can kill your urge to grind.

Daybreak's technical implementation is also far from perfect. Load times can be long when switching locations, and I ran into a number of glitches and crashes, particularly

when respawning. These hiccups aren't enough to ruin the experience, but they are frustrating.

Eventually, the grind is all there is. Fighting a war no one can win has a certain futility, especially when territorial control boils down to the singular task of capturing or defending control points. That said, the well-conceived classes and vehicles offer plenty of strategic variety and complexity. PlanetSide 2 accommodates all styles of competitive warfare, including slow and methodical snipers, run-and-gun assault commandos, and full-scale vehicular combat.

Player count often plays a large role in the tide of battle. While a good squad can steamroll through a series of zones, your faction won't be able to hold them without ample backup. No matter how good you are, some standoffs are doomed, but the scale of PlanetSide 2 means you can always find a more engaging showdown somewhere on the map. I'm not the sharpest shooter, but I found the balance fair. Even if I didn't kill an opponent every life, various team-assisting tasks allowed me to rack up satisfying amounts of XP, and respawn times are mercifully brief, so you can jump right back into action again and again.

The more I play PlanetSide 2, the more I enjoy it. Daybreak says it is committed to improving and expanding the MMO, which should give players plenty of reasons to keep returning to the battlefield. As it stands, there's more than enough incentive to try PlanetSide 2; the gunplay is solid, player progression moves along at a rewarding clip, and the intercontinental war is like no other in gaming—even if it lacks a point. —Jeff Marchiafava

7.75

PS4

» Concept

Bring PlanetSide 2's massive conflicts to console with a free-to-play monetization scheme that doesn't ruin the competition.

» Graphics

At its best, PlanetSide 2's visuals are mediocre, and some of the character models are downright goofy-looking.

» Sound

The sparse, forgettable soundtrack is drowned out by the glorious cacophony of heavy artillery.

» Playability

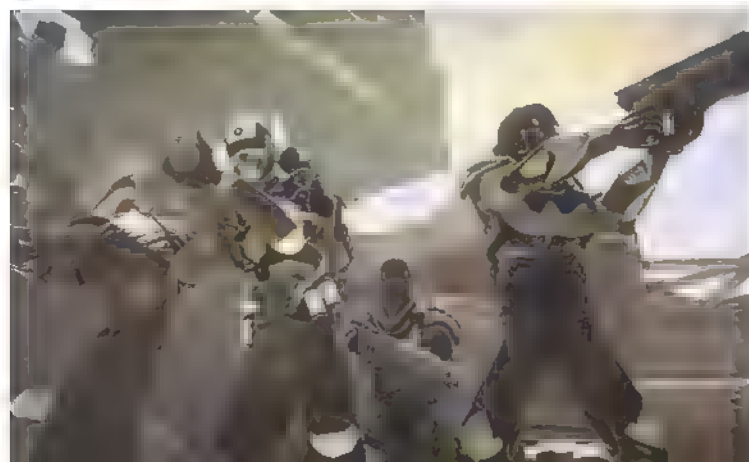
The almost complete lack of guidance gives PlanetSide 2 an unnecessarily steep learning curve. The actual shooting mechanics are solid.

» Overall Impression

PlanetSide 2 is one long grind, but the scale and competitive feel are unique.

» Replay Value

Moderately High



God Of War III Remastered

Scaling a familiar peak



9

generations
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer Sony Santa Monica Studio Release July 14 Rating M

PS4

» Concept

One of the best games of the last generation comes to PS4

» Graphics

The original looked great, but this version improves the framerate and resolution

» Sound

Kratos still alternates between silence and shouting for all communication

» Playability

The action may look frantic and out-of-control, but guiding Kratos through the chaos is easy and fun

» Unlocks/Reborn

The core game is still amazing, though the lack of any notable changes or additions in this release disappoints

» Replay Value

Moderate

With so many publishers releasing old games on the current generation of consoles, new players have the opportunity to experience titles they didn't catch the first time around. Bringing those gamers into the fold is important, but people who loved the original version are also looking for an incentive to revisit their favorites. Many definitive releases cater to established fans by adding new tweaks and features. God of War III Remastered is not one of those games.

When it first came out in 2010, God of War III was a groundbreaking game that upped the ante for visual presentation, brutal action, and cinematic moments. None of that has changed, it is still a fantastic experience that stands out as one of the most astounding achievements in gaming. If you haven't played it before, you are in for a treat.

God of War III is the conclusion to an epic three-part story (though other games on PSP and PS3 fill in some gaps), with Kratos storming Mount Olympus in a quest to kill Zeus – and any other god who gets

in his way. The combat is fluid and fast, and you can whip out a variety of stylish attacks with ease. A great selection of weapons and upgrades makes it fun to experiment with your abilities and find a fighting style that plays to your strengths. When you aren't squaring off against hordes of enemies or imposing bosses, you are treated to jaw-dropping setpiece moments that make the world seem impossibly massive and alive. From the opening moments to the final credits, the action remains intense and entertaining.

If you have played God of War III before, you already know what makes the game so much fun. For those players, the improvements here are so sparse they are barely noticeable. The framerate is smoother and the resolution is better, which are both undeniably good things. However, the original version was so technically impressive in the first place that these changes don't feel like big steps forward. Being so far ahead of the pack in 2010 was no small feat, so I'm not complaining. Just be aware that the new layer of polish doesn't

feel as transformative as it does with similar releases.

The only brand new addition is a photo mode. Like the same feature in The Last of Us Remastered, this lets you pause the action and adjust the zoom, framing, and filters to create a screenshot ready for you to capture and share. The idea is neat, but the limited visual adjustments (plus restrictions on camera movement) make it hard to explore the possibilities from all angles.

If you were planning on playing (or replaying) God of War III regardless, you can't go wrong with this version. It's the same game that earned so much acclaim five years ago. With that being said, God of War III Remastered does nothing to entice old players to return; apart from photo mode, you won't find any new options or tweaks to inject novelty into the adventure. You even need to beat the game before you can use the handful of included DLC costumes. God of War III is still a fantastic experience, and a significant beat in gaming history, but this remaster doesn't build on its legacy. **— Joe Juba**



Path Of Exile: The Awakening

Addictive variety



Style 1-Player Role-Playing Action (6-Player Online) **Publisher** Grinding Gear Games
Developer Grinding Gear Games **Release** July 10 **Rating** M

8.5

PC

» Concept

A massive overhaul and content expansion for Grinding Gear's original 2013 action/RPG

» Graphics

Nothing amazing, but appropriate for cutting a swath through hordes of enemies

» Features

Audio logs convey the lore effectively in the expansion content alongside traditional bashes and basts

» Playability

Anyone can start clicking through hordes of opponents and bosses. The complexity comes from finding the best builds, especially when dealing with higher difficulty tiers and hardcore mode

» Entertainment

Path of Exile's updates since release make it a compelling experience for loot-lovers everywhere, and the new additions offer even more longevity

» Replay Value

High

Whether you're exploring the dream of gladiatorial guru Daresso or hunting down grotesque organs to summon up the final loot, you're constantly analyzing loot. Click after click yields piles of gear, all with different sockets, links, and quality. Path of Exile certainly isn't the first game to make loot the focal point of things, but here the customization options are unparalleled, and this expansion adds enough variety to keep things interesting – even when you're playing the same map or zone over and over.

Before even discussing actual content, the most important thing The Awakening corrects is desynchronization, one of the biggest points of contention in the original game. Whatever they did over at Grinding Gear Games, there's no more getting caught on walls or whiffing at enemies that should be in front of you, as long as your latency is solid. While this isn't really a feature, this fix alone does a lot toward making the online-only game much more enjoyable to play.

The Awakening adds a much-awaited fourth act to the story – a bizarre trek through an aqueduct, a dead lake, corrupted mines, heroic dreams, and a grotesque beast. Act 4 delivers lore in more unified sections, with backstory to legendary characters like Kaom and Daresso available in bite-sized audio clips as you work through these new areas featuring cool new enemies and themed zones



The new content is sizable and varied, but a significant difficulty spike may have some players scratching their heads. Some of the Act 4 bosses, particularly the final boss, are incredibly unforgiving. This is especially significant if you're playing on hardcore mode (where one death results in permanent game over for your character); you may breeze through the early sections only to get killed in an instant due to a single unexpected attack. I died around 20 times to the final boss on Normal difficulty, and countless times on Cruel – but then again, perhaps my build, gear, or skills simply weren't up to the challenge. Act 4 content seems like it might be best to tackle with a few friends.

New skills and abilities give players plenty of opportunities to find the perfect build, from simple

staples like permanent golem minions to complex chaining spells that trigger when other conditions are met. Of particular note are the new jewel slots in the massive passive skill web, allowing players to swap bonuses in and out of their build. Some of these jewels are pure bonuses, like damage addition and other effects, but others allow players to go crazy with build- and game-changing effects that work in a radius around the jewel.

The Awakening is a welcome and wild addition, giving Path of Exile just what it needs to stay interesting. With the additions in this expansion and other content updates since launch, there's enough variety and alternate advancement to keep even the most voracious of loot grinders and build optimizers coming back for more. » **Daniel Tack**

Etrian Odyssey 2 Untold: The Fafnir Knight

Thinking your way to victory

8

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Atlus Developer Atlus Release August 4 Rating T

3DS

» Concept

Remake the second Etrian Odyssey and add more content, including a brand new story mode

» Graphics

The monster designs are creative, but the character models aren't memorable

» Sound

The classical exploration music is fantastic, juxtaposing a nice calm to the tense challenge

» Playability

Etrian Odyssey continues to get more accessible, but that it still has flaws

» Verdict

The Fafnir Knight is exciting due to better storytelling and fun new mechanics, such as town building and advertising campaigns

» Replay Value

Moderate

The Etrian Odyssey franchise just keeps getting better in terms of its game systems and accessibility. The series is still the punishing, map-drawing dungeon crawler that the hardcore RPG audience loves, but a lot of frustrating and archaic elements have faded, such as endless backtracking between floors and unreasonable difficulty levels.

The Untold games (remakes of the original entries) have a bigger focus on story and characters—elements that are commonly criticized in this series. The Fafnir Knight has more exciting twists than the previous entry, The Millennium Girl. The character interactions and dialogue have come a long way, but compared to other RPGs, they still fall short. You've seen versions of these characters and the story before: You have the best friend with a heart of gold, two main characters of the opposite sex with a mysterious connection, and the enigmatic wildcard. The narrative isn't much better, focusing on trials to complete a ceremony that happens every 100 years.

Tired story aside, the basic gameplay is still solid. You map your way through labyrinths and examine every inch to ensure you don't miss a hidden passage. However, the



dungeons and FOEs (deadly mini-bosses) themselves are much more interesting. Etrian Odyssey is all about surviving and getting around obstacles, whether you're swiftly dodging before a FOE unleashes a wave of fire or navigating ice that slides you forward until you hit an obstruction. You can also use these dangers to your advantage, like pushing those ice blocks to damage FOEs and lure them into traps.

Etrian Odyssey rewards you for knowing when to use your brain to avoid a fight. When it's not immediately apparent how to avoid the encounter, the fun is in figuring it out by studying enemy patterns and looking for traps. This extends to tough boss battles where you need to exploit weaknesses and use status effects to your advantage. As the dungeons get more complex, they require some annoying backtracking, which is my primary complaint about them. Sometimes you're forced to go in circles before you can advance. At the very least, dungeons have a lot to interact with this time around, whether you're lighting spider webs on fire to damage enemies, raising bridges, or triggering random events that test your luck.

I also love building my characters and having complete customization over the skills I want to invest in. Grimoires, obtained by chance during battles, allow you to equip characters with skills normally unavailable to their class. These are

fun to experiment with, especially since you can buff skills you already have, but they didn't feel like they made that big of a difference in my success.

Outside of dungeons, The Fafnir Knight has plenty of fun activities to break up the grind. You can help out by finding recipes and ingredients for an up-and-coming restaurant, and the resulting dishes grant perks like regenerating HP and status effect resistance. Furthermore, a fun new town-building mechanic lets you put cash into the town, which nets better facilities and increases the population. Raising the population helps because you can do different advertising campaigns for the restaurant, catering dishes to the inhabitants' wants. You keep the funds collected from the revenue you bring in, which becomes a great way to raise money for better equipment, and I enjoyed maximizing my profits and watching some of the crazier recipes succeed.

I don't have much to knock about The Fafnir Knight beyond some tedious points and the uninspired story and characters. In fact, as soon as I opened up cooking and town development, I found myself in an engaging, hard-to-put-down gameplay loop. That being said, after numerous Etrian Odyssey entries, the formula hasn't changed much. It's still fun, but without any large leaps, Etrian is starting to get stale. I feel playing one entry is like playing them all. » Kimberley Wallace



Her Story

A tale to keep you up at night



Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Sam Barlow Developer Sam Barlow Release June 26 Rating NR

8.5

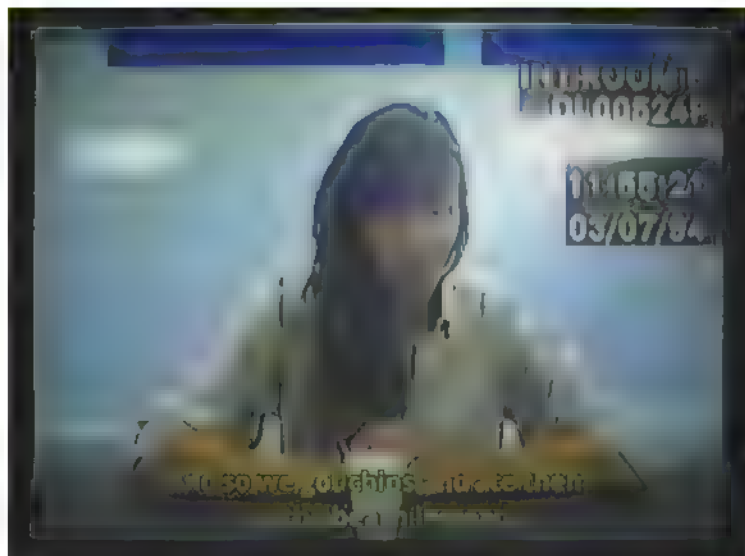
PC • iOS

Mystery is the appeal of crime stories, whether they are real or fictional. We hear different accounts, look for clues, and see the police follow leads – and we form our own conclusions along the way. The drive to shed light on a mystery makes us want to search for answers. Sent Hill: Shattered Memories designer Sam Barlow capitalizes on this in his first independent game, *Her Story*. *Her Story* is one of the most engrossing games I've played this year, and that's mainly because Barlow doesn't just hand players anything – he forces them to search for it.

In *Her Story*, your only job is to search a crime database by typing in keywords that bring up archived video clips. Your focus is on the fictional 1994 interrogation of a woman regarding her missing husband, and the videos in the database are from seven different interviews detectives had with her.

Keywords aren't hard to uncover. The game gives you a freebie ("murder") and you go from there. Every keyword you type only brings up the top five results, so you need to go through different avenues to discover them all, either by getting more specific or finding different keywords associated with the same event. You're not the detective on the case, but you're investigating the details for reasons that eventually become clear.

I questioned how fun it would be to just type in words at first, but it holds a lot more depth than what appears on the surface. I was obsessed with finding new phrases and details. During clips, the woman mentions various people, places, and things. Not only does this inch you closer to figuring out what happened, but they also provide new keywords to test out. What I loved



the most was making a connection, and then typing it in to see an array of new videos to watch. Uncovering this flow of new information is when *Her Story* is at its best, but it eventually slows to a trickle. Later on, finding new content becomes trial-and-error; once I exhausted my trail of topics, I had to do some stabbing in the dark to unearth new leads.

To *Her Story*'s strength, the majority of the videos are engaging, making me want to press on even when I had to guess. Some scenes have humor, while others contain twisted confessions. Not all leave you with great reveals, and some just contain a single word. The fun is finding out if that little clip means anything in the larger context of the narrative.

Also, seeing a real person interrogated instead of a polygonal character makes it easier to connect with the story, helping you buy into the scenario. The actress, Viva Seifert, nailed the role. It's not only the

"what" and "how" she says things, but also her body language that forces you to question everything.

Barlow did a good job at writing a complex mystery. He gives you just enough to keep you invested, but he never spells out anything. In fact, the fragmented way the story is delivered works to its benefit.

The subtlety of *Her Story* is what I appreciated the most, and drawing your own conclusions gives you plenty to think about at the end. You get some clear answers about what happened and why, but much is open to interpretation, casting doubt in my mind about my own deductions. That's how a mystery should leave you; even when people are convicted of crimes or proven innocent, we can't always be sure it's the right outcome.

Her Story forces you to pay attention in a way most games don't. I didn't want to miss one thread. Every word said could be a potential new lead, the dates on the videos are essential for making connections, and even certain visual differences in her clothes and appearance hold clues. I reveled in every "aha" moment, feeling a sense of achievement for catching even the smallest threads. For a more compact experience (about three hours), it certainly sticks with you. *Her Story* is an intriguing experimentation in game narrative. Its vastly different approach to telling a complex story is reason alone to play it. — **Kimberley Wallace**

» Concept

Search a crime database of archived video footage to piece together what happened to a woman's husband

» Graphics

You won't get big-budget graphics, but that's part of the charm. The game is set in the '90s, so the aesthetic matches the technology

» Sound

Sound is sparse, but what's there helps create the mood. Actress Viva Seifert does a wonderful job portraying a whirlwind of emotions

» Playability

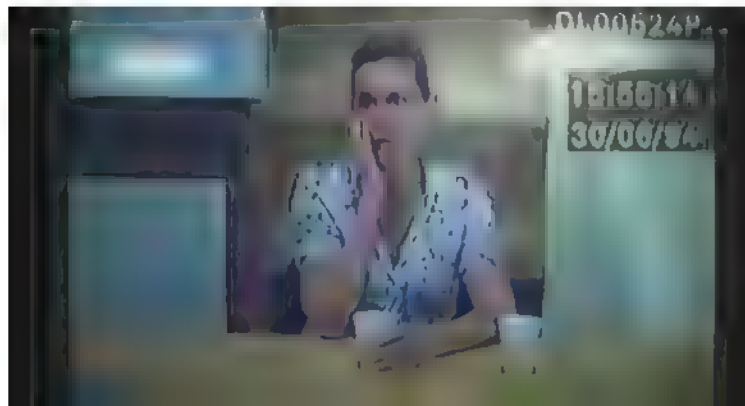
All you need to know is how to type phrases into a database, making this game extremely accessible

» Recommended

Her Story is gripping. You won't stop until you find answers, and it leaves you thinking long after the credits roll

» Replay Value

Moderate



PLAYSTATION 4

Apotheon	9	Apr-15
Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China	7.25	Jun-15
Axiom Verge	9.25	May-15
Batman: Arkham Knight	9.5	Aug-15
Battlefield: Hardline	8	May-15
Bloodborne	9.75	May-15
Citizens of Earth	7.5	Mar-15
Dark Souls II: Scholar of the First Sin	9	May-15
Devil May Cry 4: Special Edition	8.5	Aug-15
Devil May Cry: Definitive Edition	9	Apr-15
Dragon Ball Xenoverse	7.5	May-15
Dying Light	8.5	Apr-15
Evolve	8.5	Apr-15
Final Fantasy Type-0 HD	6	May-15
Game of Thrones Episode 1: Iron from Ice	8.5	Feb-15
Game of Thrones Episode 2: The Lost Lords	8	Apr-15
Game of Thrones Episode 3: The Sword in the Darkness	8.25	Jun-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4: Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
Golf Club, The	8	Oct-14
Grim Fandango Remastered	7	Mar-15
Hand of Fate	8.75	Mar-15
Helldivers	8.5	May-15
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Wolfenstein: The Old Blood	7.5	Jul-15

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PLAYSTATION 3

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Dragon Ball Xenoverse	7.5	May-15

Game of Thrones Episode 1: Iron from Ice	8.5	Feb-15
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XBOX 360

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Life is Strange: Episode 2 - Out of Time	8.5	May-15

7 | Fallout Shelter

Platform iOS Release June 15
Rating 12+

Once you're established, the vault becomes fairly automated, with no real goal in sight outside of hitting the 200-dweller cap. Making super-dwellers who produce gobs of resources is easy, and the enhanced resource buildings that become available later make this even easier. — **Daniel Tack**

6.5 | F1 2015

Platform PS4, Xbox One Release June 21
Rating E

This is the sixth officially licensed F1 title Codemasters has developed, and yet the franchise is no further along in giving fans of the sport a title that ascends the podium as the definitive, benchmark for the series. Instead, this is another title that races well but doesn't have the feature set to sustain interest. — **Matthew Kato**

7 | Payday 2: Crimewave Edition

Platform PS4 Release June 16 Rating T

Payday 2's novel heist based gameplay is still worth checking out for those interested in a refreshing cooperative experience. For veteran criminal masterminds, however, the return of easily fixable problems and lack of account migration make it hard to justify the jump from previous versions. — **Matt Bertz**

4 | Payday 2: Crimewave Edition

Platform Xbox One Release June 16 Rating T

If everything was working correctly, the Xbox One version would be on par with the PlayStation 4, but pervasive technical difficulties ultimately undermine it. More than two weeks into the review, we were still experiencing crippling lag in the Crimewave mission select screen, and when missions do load we had a less than 10 percent success rate in joining the matches. — **Matt Bertz**

3 | Godzilla

Platform PS4 Release July 14 Rating T

I grew bored with Godzilla after a few minutes. It's a towering abomination of a licensed property and a sad excuse for a game. I enjoyed the novelty and cheesiness, but none of the gameplay held my attention. — **Andrew Reiner**

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Resident Evil Revelations 2	8	May-15
ScreamRide	8.5	May-15
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 1 - Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15
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You Must Build A Boat	9	Aug-15
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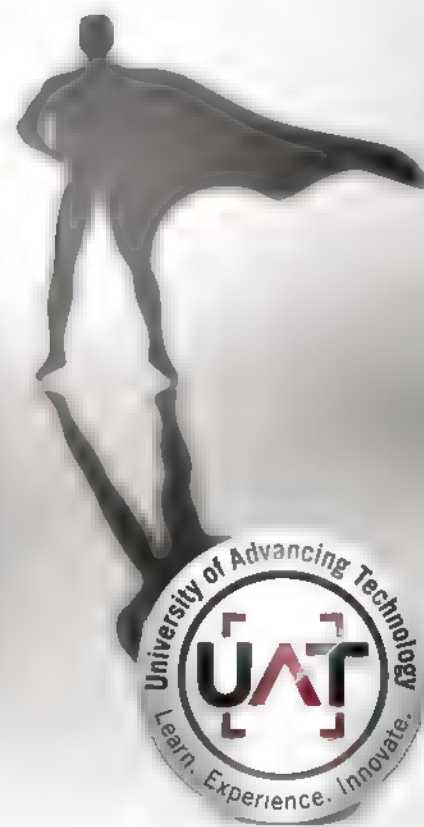
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JOE

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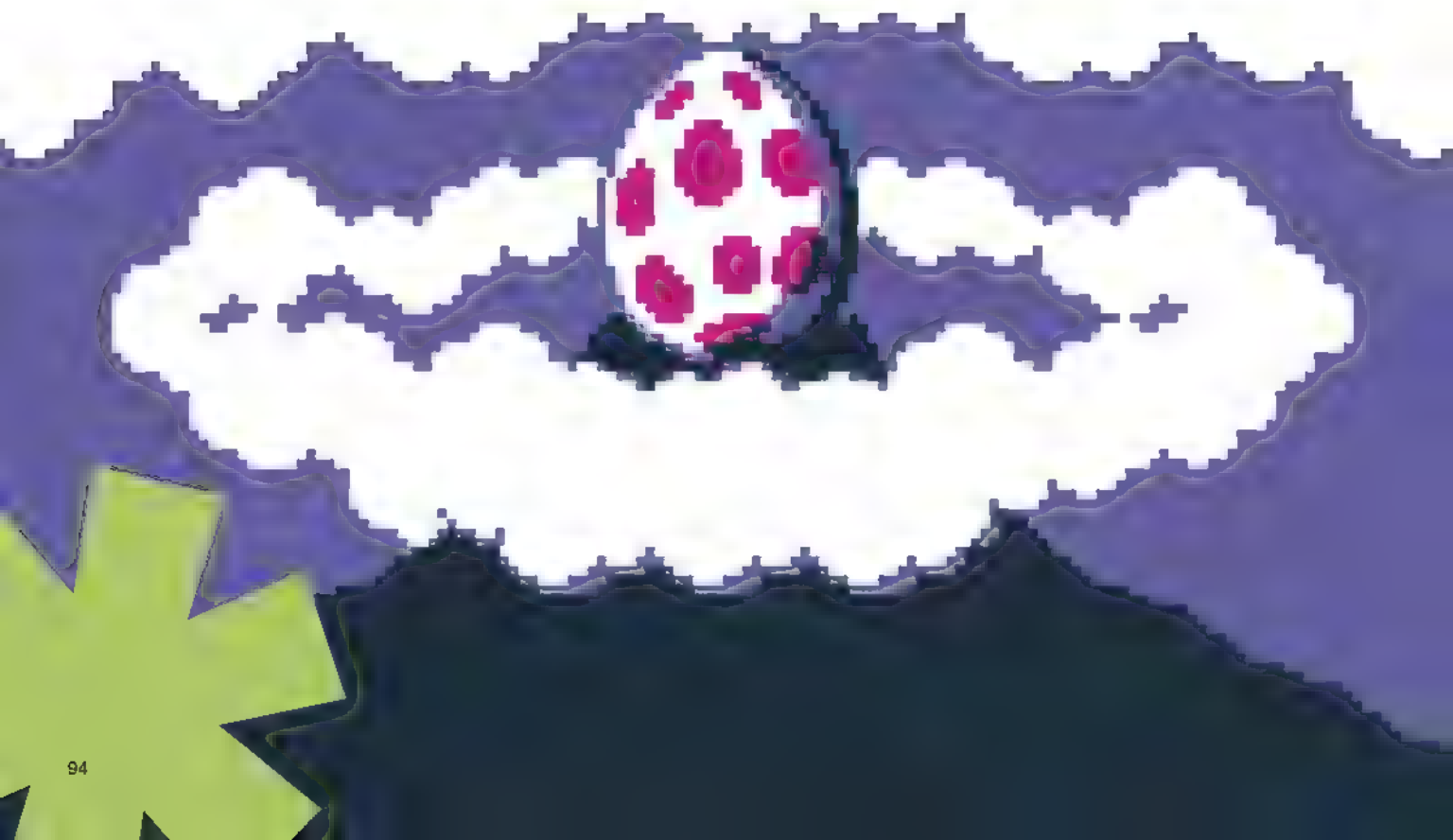
Looking Back At Link's Awakening

by Kyle Hilliard

How an after-hours passion project turned into Zelda's first handheld adventure

Link's Awakening for the Game Boy was more than just a handheld offshoot of a popular franchise. It established important Zelda staples in terms of story, humor, and a focus on character development that the series still uses to this day, all while carving an identity that remains distinct more than 20 years later.

Link's Awakening was the first Zelda to feature fishing, allow Link to grab cuccos, and highlight musical instruments as more than just another item in Link's inventory. The game also had extended side quests, like the mission to find all the secret seashells and a trading game with the world's inhabitants. Link's Game Boy adventure was a huge success for Nintendo, dramatically boosting handheld sales in 1993 and selling more than 5 million copies over its lifetime. It sits comfortably at number three on Game Informer's top 25 Game Boy games of all time list, and also cracked the top 100 on our Top 200 Games of All Time list.





For players who grew up with the Game Boy instead of a home console, Link's Awakening was the entry point into one of Nintendo's most important and popular franchises. But in many ways the game was meant to be a strange love letter to the Zelda games that came before it. In an Iwata Asks interview with Nintendo — where the company's late president and CEO Satoru Iwata shared stories with the creators of its most successful games — Link's Awakening director Takashi Tezuka said that during development it felt like the team was making a parody of a Zelda game, as opposed to a true Zelda entry.

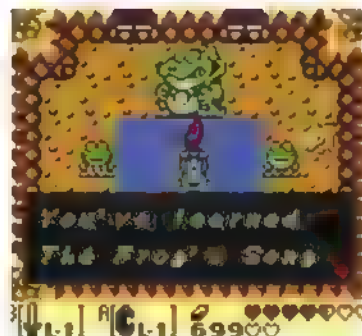
"When we say parody, I'm not sure where that word comes from because maybe there are translation issues," Tezuka told us when we asked what he meant by that comment. "With Zelda games we usually plan them out, every detail is considered. With Link's Awakening, we were working on that after our other work was done. Kind of like a club of people who loved Zelda and got together to make it. It has a different feeling for that reason."

The original plan for Zelda's first Game Boy adventure was to bring a modified version of Link to the Past to the handheld, but that idea fell by the wayside. Instead, Link's Awakening started as an unsanctioned after-hours

passion project for members of the Link to the Past team. "The main programmer wanted to challenge himself to create a Zelda experience on a portable system to see what he could do, and I was into the idea. We just had a passion to try and do something interesting," Tezuka says. "We didn't really have permission to do it necessarily. We were just playing around."

It didn't take long for the game to become more than an after-hours experiment. "Once we got it to a certain level of creation and completion that we wanted to show, then we took it to the company and got permission to continue developing it," Tezuka says. "But initially it was just a little pet project of ours. Because we started it that way — just making a game we wanted to make — it may defy Zelda conventions. It might have interesting characters and situations we may not have had otherwise."

At the time of development, *Twin Peaks* was at the height of its popularity. The show's dreamlike world and focus on a small cast of characters in a small town were elements Tezuka wanted represented in the game. As a result, Link's Awakening was one of the first Zelda games to have a stronger focus on story. Link built relationships with NPCs with more dialogue interactions, had extended



conversations with Marin (the girl who found him washed up on shore after his boat crashed), and was guided along his journey periodically by an owl (who would later make an appearance in *Ocarina of Time*). "I wanted to make something that, while it would be small enough in scope to easily understand, it would have deep and distinctive characteristics," Tezuka said during his Iwata Asks interview. Link's Awakening was about more than just solving puzzles, fighting enemies, and saving Zelda. Koholint Island was far different from Hyrule, and its characters were charming and mysterious. This was why many callouts from other Nintendo games made their way in.

Link's Awakening featured strange scenarios that served as the platform for cameos from Mario, Yoshi, and Kirby, as well as Mario enemies like goombas and chain-chomps. Remembering about the game with his boss during the Iwata Asks interview, Tezuka admitted he wasn't even sure if he got official permission from Kirby's creators, HAL Laboratory, to include him in the game.

Alongside Majora's Mask, Link's Awakening continues to be among the stranger entries in the Zelda series. With its *Twin Peaks* influences, myriad outside Nintendo references, strange characters, and surprise ending, the game stands out despite its limited visuals and smaller world. It was the first Zelda game for many young players, and will retain its legacy for years to come even as handheld gaming technology moves forward at a brisk pace. ♦



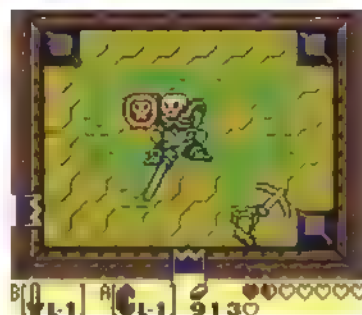
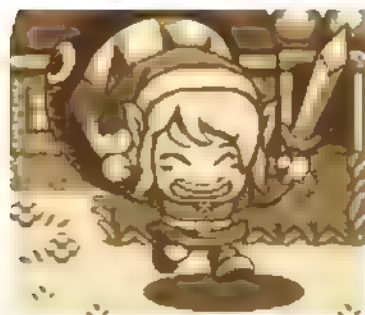
Link's Awakening

Two versions of Link's Awakening exist. The original released on the Game Boy in 1993. In 1998, Nintendo followed up with the Link's Awakening DX for the Game Boy Color. This version added a new dungeon and compatibility with the Game Boy Printer, allowing players to print out in-game photos after visiting a camera shop. The expanded DX version of the game is available on Nintendo's eShop for the 3DS.



Majora's Mask

Many think the events of Majora's Mask are the product of a dream, much like they are in Link's Awakening. One hint of this is the presence of the song "Ballad of the Windfish" in Majora's Mask. The song serves as an important plot element of Link's Awakening. "It really came down to a decision by the sound team," says Zelda series producer Eiji Aonuma. "They were looking for inspiration, something that would fit the theme, and since Link's Awakening was about collecting instruments it made sense that you would want to use this for a band in this case. For us, really, it was just a playful choice that referenced a previous game and nothing more than that."



DARK DETAILS

Profiling Destiny's new big bad

Destiny: The Taken King introduces guardians to the most dangerous threat they've ever faced. Oryx is a mysterious Hive creature born out of Darkness who wields an ancient power that allows him to bend the will of the living, corrupting them into his service. This demonic-looking force has traveled to Earth seeking vengeance on the guardians who killed his son Crota. However, the entirety of

the Hive on Earth and the Moon descend from Oryx's lineage.

Oryx resides on The Dreadnaught, an enormous ship that functions like his castle. This vessel holds a massive weapon that Oryx can use to amplify his powers and allow him to destroy Light. We spoke with Bungie's art team about how they designed such a fiercely grotesque villain. *by Ben Reeves*

"We needed to convey a sense of his regal stature among the Hive. This is where it got really interesting – we experimented with blending opulent 'royal' ornamentation with brightly colored insect exoskeletons and we found that there was a form language there which actually communicated both simultaneously."

"Oryx's head was designed to evoke the feeling of giant horns, or a massive crown, but within the Hive aesthetic."



"For the Shade, I was very much trying to pull from moth imagery for both his wings and how he was lit," says senior artist Adrian Majkrzak. "I wanted the Shades to be lit in a way that was reminiscent of a moth under an old farm light. The smoke pouring from him was supposed to feel like a just-extinguished fire, with a blue, oily feel. My hope was that these things would evoke a ghostly, ethereal feeling."

"The overall design for Oryx tries to channel the feeling of a Moth-like creature," says art director Christopher Barrett. "Early on, when we set out to design the hive, creatures like moths and worms were the thematic pillars upon which we built that race. Oryx is meant to feel like a superlative to everything Hive. His opening wings and bold colors subconsciously broadcast just how dangerous he is." ♦





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